

MICHAEL JORDAN'S INFAMOUS INDUCTION SPEECH

By Nathan Siegel

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

One key to greatness is turning the slightest slight into power.

Despite the Lakers' dreadful 8-16 record, Kobe Bryant was all smiles after last Sunday's game. He had just surpassed Michael Jordan, his idol, on the all-time scoring list and was obliging reporters with a glimpse into the inner-workings of a five-time champ: "[My] competitive nature is something that frightens a lot of people, when you peel back truly what's inside ..." Bryant [said](#).

It sounded like Bryant had taken a page from his hero's book. On a September evening in 2009, Michael Jordan, donning an oversized gray suit, swaggered onto the stage of his [induction ceremony](#) into the Naismith Hall of Fame, surrounded by thunderous applause — and then, he began to bawl. After composing himself, the man who is arguably the greatest basketball player of all time proceeded to deliver a rare and candid manifesto on what made him tick.

[When Jordan thanked Isaiah Thomas and Magic Johnson for "freezing" him out his first year in the NBA, he meant it.](#)

It wasn't pretty. For more than 20 minutes, the superhuman Jordan meticulously recalled every slight, criticism and doubt leveled at him over the past 40 years. He made sure that the high school coach who picked 6' 7" sophomore Leroy Smith over Jordan knew he "made a mistake, dude." (Smith was in the crowd). He relayed how legendary college coach Dean Smith, also in attendance, had "burned" him up by not putting him on the cover of *Sports*

Illustrated in his freshman year. And he rubbed dirt in the wounds of Bryon Russell, a guard who failed to guard him in [one of the most famous plays in history](#). “He was pathologically competitive,” says Galen Clavio, executive director of the Sports Journalism Center at Indiana University-Bloomington.

Not surprisingly, the basketball universe — reporters, players, fans — diagnosed Jordan with a permanent chip on his shoulder. The chip looked only larger when they considered the night’s other inductees — John Stockton, David Robinson and Jerry Sloan — who filled their speeches with humility and thanks.



But in all the hoopla over Jordan’s supposed gracelessness, his critics missed a crucial insight into greatness — especially, what fuels it. “Nothing seemed to motivate Jordan more than a real or perceived insult,” says John Affleck, director of the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State University. Jordan had the rare gift of turning the slightest dig into an extraordinary source of motivation. Taunts were dares. Adversity he

welcomed, in a curious way, because it could spur him to become even greater. It wasn't sublimation, exactly, but it was sublime. When he thanked Isaiah Thomas and Magic Johnson for "freezing" him out his first year in the NBA, he meant it: "You guys gave me the motivation to say, 'You know what, evidently I haven't proved enough,'" he told them. It was an unconventional thank-you, but it was sincere.

The Jordan breed may soon be extinct, or at least never let off its leash. A look at the game's current studs — like LeBron James, Kevin Durant or Derrick Rose — reveals a different tone. Durant's Most Valuable Player speech was soft-spoken and thankful, not for the stepping stones he conquered on his meteoric rise to the top, but for those who supported and helped him. On the court, James involves his teammates, proof that the me-versus-the-world outlook that so well characterized Jordan and Bryant hasn't been picked up by Cleveland's finest.

Maybe it's the hypervigilance required by the pervasiveness of Twitter, Facebook and the 26-hour news cycle. When Bryant called his teammates "[soft like Charmin](#)" last week, even the toilet paper company [jumped on his back](#). Which means we may soon feel nostalgia for Jordan's cutthroat realism and his willingness to speak the truth: Winning — and greatness — ain't pretty.

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