

## Michael Jordan and The Last Dance: a contemplative observation



photo Netflix

### **Introduction**

Media and sports enthusiasts are once again captivated by basketball legend Michael Jordan now that the ten-part docu series "The Last Dance" has been released on Netflix. The fortunes of the Chicago Bulls around stars such as Scottie Pippen, Steve Kerr, Dennis Rodman, Michael Jordan and coach Phil Jackson are made public with previously unseen behind-the-scenes footage. It provides exciting television. Because of the beautiful actions on the field, but also from the dynamics within the team and management.

Reason for us to take a closer look at both the person and the player Michael Jordan. We do this based on observations and our view of actions, motivational drivers and action preferences in sports. The greatness of Jordan brings with it the pitfalls of Be Like Him and One Size Fits All and we would like to unravel that.

### **Movement and preferences as a starting point**

With the ActionTypes approach, we initially look at motor preferences. People move in their own typical way. There is always a purpose, an intention. In other words, movement can be understood as a continuous interaction between cognitive, perception and motor processes. Think of it as solving problems in a particular context or environment. The insights that arise from this do not only say something about what the athlete needs for his expression on the field in movement preference, technique training and physical support. They also have a connection with the individual cognitive and emotional. So how you effectively communicate with the athlete, coach him and shape him in movement. Focusing on the athlete's own identity is an elementary starting point for his or her development.

### **We highlight Michael Jordan's movement preferences through four observations:**

- he uses a concentric (pushing) dynamics or a more plyometric (up and down bouncing) dynamics when walking, running and jumping;
- he initiates his actions from the large body muscles or from the fine motricity;
- the organization of his motor skills is horizontal (indirect) or vertical (direct);
- a dominant left or right shoulder directs the movement.

### **Dynamics of walking, running and jumping**

Michael Jordan moves from a deeper position, characterized by a smaller angle between the upper and lower legs. In this, the muscle chain at the front of the body (including the thigh muscles) plays an important role in the organization against gravity. This chain continues into the thumb, index finger and middle finger. This is the reason for Michael's observation in the following video clip  that it is these three fingers that ensure the control of the ball when catching and the control when passing and taking free throws. With some surprise, he adds that the ring finger and little finger hardly contribute. After winning the gold Olympic medal in Atlanta, volleyball player Peter Blangé also noted that he used the thumb, forefinger and middle finger for setting the ball. On the other hand, there are top setters in which the ring finger and little finger play an important role in their actions.

Knowing how the anterior muscle chain runs through the body and that it plays an important role in Jordan (and Blangé) preferences, it is easily explained to us. Likewise, basketball players with this dynamic prefer to perform their dribbles by making a movement with the thumb, index and middle finger on the ball, with the forearm rotating slightly inwards over the thumb. They can easily move and jump from start-stop. Compare it with soccer players such as Zinedine Zidane and Ruud van Nistelrooij.

It naturally works differently for basketball players with a more plyometric (bouncing) dynamic, such as Vince Carter, Tony Parker and the famous Bob Cousy. They organize against gravity by activating the posterior muscle chain. The calf muscles are particularly addressed by the bouncing movement. Related to the posterior muscle chain, the little finger and ring finger together with arm rotations over the little finger play an important role here. In movement they accelerate easily, again and again. Double accelerating no problem. These kind of accelerations can be seen in soccer with, among others, Arjen Robben and Lionel Messi.

### **Eye-hand coordination**

Michael Jordan manipulates the ball one-handed and two-handed under the ring; he also achieves sometimes inimitable scores under pressure and in physical plays. His ballhandling is further away from the body. For us it is an indication of a combination of "sharp" eyes (a detailed look) and the associated fine motor skills. A sophisticated eye-hand coordination as the most important motor synergy, where the eyes can see the hands. This is possible if the ball is carried a little further away from the body and that is easy to observe with Jordan.

He combines his ball skills with the gift of spatial positioning of the forearm and hand. What we find in years of testing with these athletes is the combination of sharp detail eyes, logical decision-making and fine motor skills. Together with the dominance of the right brain focused on perception, improvisation

and spatial orientation, this leads to the gift of cool split-second decisions, even in the heat of the moment.

Compare Michael Jordan's preference for the use of fine motor skills and a little further from the body with that of Scottie Pippen and Dennis Rodman, two of his companions at the Chicago Bulls. Both initiate their movements from the large body muscles of the torso, upper legs and upper arms and visibly recognize the need to feel the ball or opponent closer to their body. Feeling plays a major role in them. From our tests with athletes, we find here a combination of broad (global) view, decisions on feeling and the use of gross motor skills. Contrary to Jordan's preference, there is no sharp detail view, which is preferably used unconsciously. Exemplary is the one-on-one defense by Pippen. He practically followed opponents, while Jordan defended a bit more at a distance with his fast hands so as not to be outflanked by taller defenders.

### **Horizontal (indirect) or vertical (direct)**

Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen show indirect (horizontal) actions. They aim to create the best starting point for scoring. With their unconscious horizontality and spatial alignment, they formed a two unit with the Bulls, which felt situational and positional. Jordan often receives the ball from Pippen and then he shoots.

Basketball players with a horizontal organization of their motor skills are characterized by a shot with a flatter ball track, which results from the slightly more side-facing position of the elbow (in relation to the shoulder line), as with Jordan. A comparison with the more point-played ball track of Golden State Warriors Stephen Curry looms. It is related to the verticality of his motor skills, with Curry there is coordination when the elbow points more downwards. The shot's ball track results from it.

And then the difference between direct and indirect players when it comes to the intention. Dennis Rodman comes into the picture as a direct basketball player, he goes straight to the intention. There is a situation, but direct (vertical) players can only integrate it when they are on their way to the goal of their action. This is how they want to make an impact.

### **Dominant shoulder**

The dominant shoulder plays a role in directing the movement, blocking opponents and the length of preparation and action when firing. You can clearly see the contrast between Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen. Where in his actions, dribbles and approaches to the basket in the right-handed Jordan the dominant right shoulder (turned slightly inwards) leads the movement, in the equally right-handed Pippen the left shoulder. While the right shoulder remains in place, Michael releases the left shoulder relaxed during an action. Pippen will not do that. His left shoulder remains in place, slightly turned inward. The dominant shoulder also affects differences in the length of preparation and action when passing and shooting.

If you want to introduce a more tailor-made individual approach to players during training and coaching, there are plenty of points of interest available for all levels. Unfortunately, there is still much talk of Be Like Me and One Size Fits All. Our idea is about individual customization. In basketball and in other sports. It requires understanding how it works for the individual athlete and utilizing the natural self-expression. "The Last Dance" shows how the preferred actions of Jordan et al with the Triangle (triangle game) introduced to the Bulls by assistant coach Tex Winter in the passing game became

more and more aligned. The ongoing freedoms and options matched the need for freedom, variation between options and improvisation of the supporting players.

### **The myth called "hang time".**

His nicknames speak volumes. Air Jordan and His Royal Airness stem from images of Michael hovering toward the basket. In an interview with the Brabants Dagblad, Jos Kuipers (Fresno State University, Nice, Nashua Den Bosch, national team player) who played against Jordan, records how the American could fly like no other and stay in the air. Unmistakable is the distinctive jump power, timing, explosiveness and athleticism. But are people really able to hang in the air?

John Brenkus explores the limits of human performance. In *The Perfection Point*, the producer and author analyzes how Michael Jordan seemed to defy the laws of gravity. Fooled by the countless reruns of spectacular slow motions, the context of delirious fans, flashy cameras, and the deep desire that humans can perform otherworldly, it creates an almost indelible impression that Michael could fly. The impressive dunks are true, but hang time is a pure illusion, Brenkus concluded.

He substantiates his finding based on the flight time, the parabola of the jump and the movements around the body's center of gravity. Whoever jumps, without aids, the flight time is less than one second. From take-off to landing, the flight path is a parabola, with just above the top the degrees of freedom are created to optimize the dunk. Sometimes it is a parabola with a more vertical character and sometimes one more horizontal, like with Jordan. The body's center of gravity follows the path of the parabola without stopping. These are the counter movements of the pulling up and stretching of the legs and certainly also of the head that cause the illusion that Michael hangs still for a moment.

Jordan's "hang time" time is no greater than what the physical laws of gravity consider possible. So hang time is also an illusion for Air Jordan.

### **Cognitive and emotional preferences**

The trinity in the body-mind connection, in the form of the cohesion of the individual cognitive, emotional and motricity, shows beautiful points of interest in 'The Last Dance'.

For Jordan, that is his analytical and tactical ability. A logical thinker with a practical approach. Exercise material and the approach should be logically thought out and concrete. This way you provide him with information and you also communicate with him. Michael is someone who needs freedom to choose the best solution on the impulse of the moment. If you restrict these kind of players, they will not come into their power. In coaching use their preference for freedom and to improvise several options. Their continuation and completion is therefore given a creative and unpredictable character and is difficult to defend for opponents.

Jordan dares to wait until the last minute in his game, which is an indication of right brain dominance. It characterized Michael's playing and we see that with many more players. The late decision maker versus the early decision maker. It is only an unconscious preference, not better or worse, but different! Like in 1989 in the decisive game of the series against the Cleveland Cavaliers in which Jordan made the difference with three seconds on the shot clock. He once said about those many last

moments: "If the ball does not go in, then I will do it the next time again, give me the ball." You can expect players who do so without hesitation to be brought to the final shot in these kinds of crucial situations.

Although Michael Jordan already excelled in the late eighties, there were no big prizes for the Chicago Bulls back then. The Detroit Pistons literally and figuratively stood in the way. Using experienced players such as Isiah Thomas, Bill Laimbeer and Dennis Rodman, the Detroit team acted defensively, physically and intimidating. It earned them the nickname Bad Boys. Their strategy was mainly aimed at making the opponent impossible to play. And that was exactly what the Bulls with many feelers in their team were sensitive to. They let themselves be provoked and taken out of their game. Until Jordan coolly analyzed what happened, the team devoted themselves to stop responding and face the Bad Boys with a determined smile to make them leave the field disillusioned. It turned out to be a turning point and the basis for the first series of NBA championships. It is striking that the Bulls eventually enlisted the worst Bad Boy Rodman, who came from Chuck Daly's school.

### **Motivational drivers**

Our action preferences and our deep motivational drivers are at the level of nature. It is the distinction between what gives the person (from the emotional system) tone and drive and how he acts in all dynamics. Contrary to action preferences, the deep motivational drivers cannot be observed from the outside by means of movements.

However, the docuseries makes it clear that one of the deep motivations of Michael Jordan can hardly be missed. What passes by unmistakably points to what we call the Competition motive, the drive arises by wanting to gain unconditional willpower. Jordan himself: "I do it to win, the more important the game, the greater the drive." And when Phil Jackson says there is no I in TEAM, His Royal Airness replicates with a significant "but in winning." The absolute will to win was also clicked with Doug Collins, Jackson's predecessor.

A player with a Competition preference is completely "on" as soon as he is challenged, there is no other way than to emerge victorious. This also applies to Jordan. Be it his brothers who are stirring up young Michael by claiming he couldn't do something. Or Earvin "Magic" Johnson who thought he could back him up in a training game of the Dream Team in the run-up to the Olympic Games in Barcelona.

Johnson: "Michael's life was a big competition. Even when playing golf, playing cards or other games at home, money was put in and he wanted to keep going until he crushed me. The urge to always be the best, the alpha among the alphas." An urge that can also go beyond flow. At one point, Jordan's words spoke volumes: "I don't have a gambling problem, I have a competitive problem."

Incidentally, other top athletes at a global level can have very different, deep motivational drivers such as Relation and Projection. They also want to win, no doubt about that, but to bring out the best in them, you coach them on "fun" and development respectively. In short, the deep motivational drivers also require a tailored approach to the individual.

### **In conclusion**

The Last Dance is not only the historiography of Michael Jordan and his latest NBA championships. It is also the story of the Team around the Team. Creating a learning environment is not enough, the landscape will also have to be that of a winning organization. Coaches who want to develop their

athletes work from shared values, so that their own team identity is created. When athletes, coaches and staff act on it and support each other unconditionally, the necessary dedication, belief, vigor and courage arise.

A coaching staff can be on the right track with an athlete or a group and be successful thanks to the available qualities. No doubt about it. However, how many coaches manage this without knowing the preferences and without unnecessarily leaving anything behind? There are countless examples of mismatches. The causes are largely due to the different individuals and their variety of qualities, needs and idiosyncrasies. Something that should come together in the training and education process, in effective exercise material and communication tailored to the person and the team.

A coach knows a lot, but he does not know much more. To fill a part of that gap, ActionTypes can be used and it works. The understanding of Deep motivational drivers and action preferences helps with this. With the resulting insights, the coach is better able to understand how to handle the different team members. And to avoid any misunderstanding, the athlete does not get what he wants but what he needs.

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