

**David Halberstam**, *Playing For Keeps: Michael Jordan And The World He Made*. Random House, New York, 1999, pp. 430. US\$24.95 hardback.

It seems inevitable that, at any particular moment in time, someone will be best at a particular activity or endeavour. Some individual will possess the necessary combination of ingredients which push (or is it pull?) them to the top of their particular profession or calling. Others might equally strive to reach such heady heights, but will lack that, whatever it is,

which is reserved for, and only for, Number One. Question: How should we respond to this phenomenon? Should we celebrate (even worship?) that individual who is on top, or regard it as nothing more than a Darwinian tautology?

In *Playing For Keeps: Michael Jordan And the World He Made*, Pulitzer Prize winning author David Halberstam adopts the former approach in examining the career of Michael Jordan, basketball's stellar player of the last decade or so. In an author's note Halberstam says

'... I decided to go ahead with this book as much to write about the changes in the world of sports and what caused them as anything else. What interested me was not just Michael Jordan - the obvious journalistic question of what made him so great an athlete - but equally important, the phenomenon of him. The question I set out to answer was a simple one. When I was a young boy growing up in the forties, the signature figures of American athletics were all white baseball players - Williams, Di Maggio, Musial, Feller - and the NBA [National Basketball Association] did not even exist. How, then, in my lifetime, had it happened that the most famous athlete in the world was a young black man playing professional basketball, who had graduated from a southern school he would not even have been able to attend when I was a young foreign correspondent?' (pp. 424 + 425).

Halberstam does not, in fact, provide answers to this simple question. It is not a book about race, civil rights and sport in America. Nor is there any discussion of why mainstream America drops its racist blinkers when it comes to black celebrities, such as players and entertainers. Admiring a black player for his athletic ability, and buying products that he endorses, does not appear to have been associated with a diminution of racism in America (look who populates their jails). Halberstam asserts rather than documents the so-called relative decline of other sports to basketball. He simply ignores developments that have occurred in other American (and world) sports in the period of Jordan's career. The technological and commercial pressures that have aided basketball have also 'positively' impacted on other sports, worldwide.

*Playing For Keeps* is essentially a descriptive account of the on-court and off-court aspects of Jordan's basketball career. Halberstam follows the same formula he utilised in *October 1964* (Fawcett Columbine, New York, 1994), where he examined baseball's 1964 World Series between the

New York Yankees and the St. Louis Cardinals. The formula consists of two parts.

The first is to provide contextual information concerning off-field/court developments in the sport concerned. The major difference between baseball in the mid 1960s and basketball in the 1980s and 1990s is the amount of income flowing through sport. Technological changes affecting broadcasting, and the advent of pay and cable television have fundamentally altered the economics of sport. In addition, players can earn substantial incomes from product endorsements. Jordan's second career as a salesman of products, such as Nike footwear, was more lucrative for him than his earnings as a player. In 1998, for example, he earned an estimated US\$78 million, with only US\$33 million(!) constituting his salary (pp. 7 + 42).

The second, and more important, part of Halberstam's formula is to focus on the internal dynamics that occur between the various members – including management/ front office - of a team. Halberstam's speciality is the petty jealousies and rivalries that exist, especially, between teammates as they struggle for their 'rightful' place in the pantheon of sports. The major problem for a successful team, according to Halberstam, is to find a means to suppress, or put egos to one side, so as to act for the common good of the team. His implicit message is that the team that is best able to do this, *ceteris paribus*, will assume the mantle of champion. But isn't the nature of sport such, and one of its charms, that at the end of the season someone must win, no matter how 'bad' or 'good' are the assembled teams? Could this focus on internal tensions be nothing more than a sideshow, a form of purient gossip, in trying to develop an understanding of that which determines sporting success?

Being an intelligent and acute observer of the game, Halberstam provides readers with interesting tit-bits concerning the background and lives of players, and others, who inhabit Jordan's orbit; as well as analyses of dramatic moments and key plays in various games of Jordan's career. Jordan, like all the persons, who fall under Halberstam's gaze, is highly competitive and driven, a hard-working and assiduous trainer. Other than for his skills as a basketball player, which are immense, and his smile, which is most disarming, he seems to be a singularly uninteresting person (Should we expect sporting stars to be philosophers or bon mots?).

Jordan is a non or a-political person; neither a Jackie Robinson nor a Muhammad Ali - two athletes, who at different times and in different

ways, stood tall and fought for the rights of their fellow African-Americans. Jordan is too shrewd to let 'politics' or controversy threaten his ability to earn income from endorsements. Halberstam provides no evidence (maybe there is none) concerning whether or not Jordan participated in acts of philanthropy, as other athletes have done. Babe Ruth, that baseball great who could not control his appetites – whether it be cars, food, alcohol or women – donated money to others, particularly children at orphanages. On race Halberstam says of Jordan

'To the degree that his career reflected anything larger than sports in historical racial terms, it was the willingness of corporate America, however reluctantly, to understand that a stunningly gifted and attractive black athlete could be a compelling salesman of a vast variety of mundane products' (p. 416).

In an epilogue, in what appears to be an afterthought, Halberstam descends from Mount Olympus and devotes barely two pages to controversy surrounding Jordan's association with Nike. For endorsing Nike shoes and the added encumbrance of having to make himself available for the making of commercials Jordan, during his career to 1998, received US\$130 million (p. 412). The controversy concerned claims of Nike's use of sweatshops, child labour and denial of human rights to workers employed in third world countries.

With respect to Jordan Halberstam lamely says

'The furor seemed to bewilder Jordan ... [who] never thought that the easy affluence his endorsements bought him would or should have that kind of a downside, nor that he would become a target of pickets for allegedly exploiting children in some far-off country... There was talk in the spring of 1998 that Jordan might visit the Vietnam factories in the summer with a select media entourage, a trip that would produce great television footage and comparable pro-company spin. By the early fall that trip seemed to be postponed indefinitely' (pp. 414 + 415).

More interestingly, Halberstam provides a whitewash for Nike and chief executive officer Phil Knight. He writes

'If there was anyone more bewildered than Jordan by the furor it was Knight himself as both pioneer and visionary in a new world order in which the importance of Western

Europe declined and that of Asia and the Pacific Rim ascended, someone who had seen the future before anyone else, or at least long before most other American CEOs. He did not respond well to charges that he was less a visionary of the future than he was an exploiter of the present. His early responses to these charges were remarkably insensitive, in no small part because he was so sure that Nike was good for these countries' (p. 415).

Should athletes, such as Michael Jordan, be expected to have a social conscience and act to ensure that those who make the products that they endorse are afforded basic human rights? Is 'responsibility' something we can expect from athletes?, or do we just want them to do wondrous things to distract us from the problems of existence? Should we impose standards on athletes that we are not prepared to apply to ourselves? Dear reader, how many Nikes do you have at the bottom of your clothes cupboard?

If athletes are the new gods it might be reasonable to expect them to assume responsibilities to balance the adulation their exalted position affords them. At one point Halberstam quotes a reference to Jordan as 'Jesus in Nikes' (p. 7). Jesus, of course, cast the money lenders out of the temple; he did not sit at their feet and sup at their table. It would be stretching things to say that Jordan is responsible for child labour and other abuses to human rights. Nonetheless, such phenomena are part of *The World He Made*.

What is most disturbing, however, is the dismissive attitude of Halberstam, a writer with a distinguished pedigree, to such issues. His notion of Michael Jordan's *World*, or the phenomenon that is Michael Jordan, is the basketball court, the locker room, television and broadcasting rights and Madison Avenue – it does not extend to those who work (slave?) in Nike sweatshops. More generally, Halberstam's attitude is a natural reflection of someone, and a culture, which celebrates success. He is interested in Number One, no matter who that might be. He is insensitive, or more correctly, disinterested in those who loose out in competitive struggles. *Playing For Keeps* is simply the story of an intelligent man, a Pulitzer Prize winning author, who found himself seduced by bread and circuses and an athlete with a disarming smile.

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