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Far Afield

A sportswriter, a journey and a lifetime of memories

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By S.L. Price

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In the fall of 2003, I began a dream assignment for Sports Illustrated: Live anywhere in Europe, cover the continent in the run-up to the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, take the pulse of sports overseas in the age of terror. My family and I moved to a small town in the south of France and, despite my best efforts, began to sink into the culture. At first, I had tried to be the typical American overseas, listening to the baseball playoffs at 3 a.m. via the Internet. But we lived now not 30 minutes from the gamy and gorgeous city of Marseille, where every scarf, sticker and T-shirt proclaimed the region's fierce loyalty to France's greatest and most notorious soccer team, Olympique de Marseille; and almost overnight I found myself losing interest in the American game. I became like everyone around me, consumed with one question: When, exactly, was OM management going to wise up and fire the team's hapless coach?

*In November, the rich and overstocked galacticos of Real Madrid came in to play OM at their historic pitch, the Stade Velodrome. It was an important game for many reasons, but none mattered more than the fact that Marseille native **Zinedine Zidane** would be coming home for the first time to play OM -- the team he'd grown up in those same stands adoring, the team that had passed on him when he was young.*

So Zidane is coming home conflicted, the favorite son angling now to deal his city a fatal blow. When I hop off the subway at the spiffy Stade Velodrome the night of the game, the psychic stakes have only grown higher: In the afternoon, Marseille learned both that Valencia had gotten the America's Cup and that Zidane -- already twice named World Footballer of the Year -- has been named a finalist again. The 58,600 seats are filled, with each roiling end punctuated by the banners of the team's infamous fan clubs -- Dodgers, Fanatics, MTP, Kaotic Group, Winners, Yankees. A Confederate flag flaps incongruously in the frigid sea air. At 8:08 p.m., with AC/DC's "Hell's Bells" screeching through the sound system, the scent of marijuana drifting by, an animal roar rising out of the mass, Real Madrid comes trotting on field for warmups. Zidane lopez out, spotlights imbuing his balding head with a dim glow. He boots around a



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ball with **Raul**, then jogs off. The crowd whistles in the European salute of disgust, and Zidane and the rest of Real disappear into a tunnel.

Then the game begins, and everything Real Madrid means goes on display. Here are the cashbox boys, wielding a \$350 million budget that dwarfs any other team's, sending out its roster of megastars with studied casualness. Real doesn't play so much as pay off, and all goes as it should: Of course **Beckham** opens the scoring 21 minutes in with a looping free kick, bent just like the movie says, to put OM in a 1-0 hole. Of course Real is dominating. Then Zidane collapses at midfield, left leg writhing. Stretcher-bearers scamper out, but Zidane finally hops up, limps over to the side, and lays down like a tired hound. A sourness, an understanding that maybe all the buildup has been a con, overtakes the Stade. For 40 minutes, it looks like OM will go down without a whimper ...

Then BANG!, that quickly, the place is transformed. OM's **Ahmed Mido** heads the ball with a crack into goal, and now smoke bombs explode, banners shake, people scream. We all feel the goal as much as see it: Yes, I'm on my feet too, there before I know it, yanked up by roar of the crowd, its surging pride, the sniff of an upset. Throats yell, "All-ez! All-ez! All-ez!" and what has been a lethargic contest accelerates, the crowd and the play pulling each other along faster, faster. Beckham gets slapped with a yellow card, OM sends another header just over the crossbar, **Ronaldo** goes just wide with a header of his own. All around me, faces stretch into grins, mouths twisted by shouts and laughing. No one cares what they look like or who sees them; they've all gotten what sports can give: the chance to lose themselves. Back and forth, the two end zones of fans chant at each other, 40,000 voices booming across the field:

"*Aux Armes!*" (To Fight!), yells one.

"*Nous Sommes Les Marseille!*" (We are Marseilles!), responds the other.

"*Nous Allons Gagner!*" (We will win!)

"*Aux Arms! Aux Arms! Aux Arms!*" (Fight! Fight! Fight!)

I'm hooked. OM must win, I think. OM is going to win. For the next 11 minutes, the stadium shakes, and I'm part of a collective vibe all but impossible to resist. But just as I'm getting happy about it, just as I'm thinking of my new life in the Bouches-du-Rhone and allowing the words *This is my team, too* to take shape, everything dies. Real is Real, after all, and Zidane is Zidane, no matter where he's playing. Who else to deliver the killing blow? Zizou sets up on the left wing, clips a perfect pass to Raul, who finds the charging Ronaldo to pop home an absurdly easy goal. Everyone is watching him now: There's Zidane hugging Ronaldo and smiling, because goals are gold and you're paid millions and you do what you must, without thinking. Love is one thing, and winning another; you grind your spikes into the opponents' neck, 2-1, and it isn't going to change. The fans know it, Real knows it, Zidane knows it, too.

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So with eight minutes left, he shuffles off the field and the crowd of 60,000 that had whistled him during warmups and when he was hurt and when he scored because *We Are Marseille!*, rises to its feet as one and applauds for a good

long time, and then a chant rings out and grows as people begin to understand: "Zi-ZOU! Zi-ZOU!"

*I began writing this book late in our stay in Europe, soon realizing that if I was going to ask readers to take a trip with me, I had no choice but to give them a sense of whom, exactly, they were traveling with. So along with stories about the French Open, basketball in Belgrade, cricket in Pakistan, **Lance Armstrong**, and conflicted European feelings about America, I wove in stories about becoming a sportswriter and my various run-ins over the years with cultural icons like **Michael Jordan**, **Ted Williams**, **Ralph Nader**, and LSU's legendary running back, **Billy Cannon**.*

In January 1989, I was in a Baton Rouge bathroom with a colleague, wondering out loud about Cannon. A man in a wheelchair backed away from a urinal and said, "He's back in town. He's a dentist here now." Cannon's fame, of course, boiled down to the national championship team of 1958, his Heisman Trophy-clinching 89-yard punt return to beat Ole Miss in '59, and his later involvement in one of the nation's largest counterfeit rings. If ever there was a story to be told, his was it.

I found his office tucked back at the end of a parking lot past two nondescript restaurants. The place felt as if no one had visited in days. It was outfitted in mid-'70s suburban doctor: magazines, plastic covers on the waiting room chairs. A broad man stood alone at the reception desk, sifting papers. "I'm Billy Cannon," he said. When I said my name he boomed, "Scott, how're you boy? Come on in!"

His voice was jovial and welcoming, eyes darting around at the papers, at the empty room, at me when he thought I wouldn't notice. The handshake was like frostbite. He was balding, but at 6-foot-2 and about 250 pounds looked anything but the kindly Southern gent. His gut blew out over his belt. The wedding ring on his left hand was bounded on each side by mounds of flesh. On his desk were pictures of his three daughters and son, **Billy Jr.** He offered half his hamburger, a cold Whopper from Burger King, pulling out a white plastic knife and sawing it in two. He found a plastic cup and poured in more than half of his vanilla shake. My first mistake was to say something about him being a dentist. "Orthodontist," he said, bored.

I tried to fly past that by asking any question I could think of. It didn't matter: Cannon never asked why I was there; he acted as if strange people visited him every day. I asked about his son, about choosing to put a pressure on his boy by the mere act of naming him "Billy." Cannon got this odd look in his eye, then a gleam that never left, and I could see that, yes, here was a man who could be a criminal. "Hell," he said, "I wanted him to be me.

"I had only about two or three talks with him about it," Cannon went on, "and I told him that people were going to be after him just because of that, that he had to always be ready for it. What do we have here? I knew. And I remember when he was about 9 or 10, I was at a friend's house and Billy was outside playing basketball with some of the kids and they were beating up on him pretty bad. They threw him in a bush. And in the car on the way home I said to him, 'They were pretty rough on you, huh? You know why? Because they want to be able to walk around and tell all their friends that they kicked sh-- out of Billy Cannon's son. That's goin' to happen to you from now on. Now you tell me if you can handle it.' And you know what he said? He said, 'I can handle it.'



LSU's Billy Cannon was one of the greatest players in college football history and remained revered in Baton Rouge later in life.

AP

"I told him it was okay. I don't care if he starts it or not, it was okay. One time, he was telling me that he was in a pizza place once with a bunch of friends and some guy came up to him and said, 'Cannon, I want a piece of you outside.' And as the guy turned to walk out he hit him. The guy went down. And when he told me, I asked him, 'Did he get up?' and he said, 'He tried.' And then he looked at me and he said, 'You know, the pizza was still warm.'"

He looked at me smiling, not caring a bit whether I liked the story. I asked Cannon what his son was doing. Billy Jr. had been a linebacker at Texas A&M. Drafted by the Cowboys, Billy Jr. injured his neck and never played a down in the NFL. He was about to sue the club for the second time. Cannon said his son was working somewhere in Texas, laboring in the dust to turn a tract of land into a nuclear waste dump.

The phone rang a few times: Hello, this is Dr. Billy Cannon ..., but he waved it off. At one point I was trying to make some brilliant insight and said, "I played some football ..." and as the words left my mouth I knew I had made a mistake. Cannon shook his head, no, his lip curled slightly, and I could almost see the thought: "Don't give me that sh--. One look at you says you never came anywhere close to playing big-time ball." I'd treaded on his turf.

We heard the outside door open, childish voices out in the waiting room. Cannon thanked me for coming and invited me to stop by the next time I was in town. My last picture of Billy Cannon is of him putting up his fists and barking to his little patient, "Come on in, boy, I think I can handle you." The kid put his head down and waded into Cannon's stomach. I got in the car and drove toward the State House, feeling like I'd missed something and would never know what.

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I had known Michael Jordan in college at the University of North Carolina, when I worked at The Daily Tar Heel and covered his sophomore season. Whenever we saw each other over the subsequent years he always made extra time to chat and gossip and talk about Chapel Hill, no matter that his fame was exploding far beyond the confines of the NBA, the U.S., even sports itself. Europeans with absolutely no knowledge of basketball admired him for his physical grace, his effortless ease.

But what stuck most about our encounters was how much joy he took in remembering his early years, in a way that was almost incomprehensible to me. For the longest time, the past had been something I'd tried to escape from. For Jordan, it was a refuge.

In April 1992, I was writing columns for *The Miami Herald* when Jordan came in with the Bulls to play the Miami Heat. His fame had become madness by then; people parking outside his house to photograph him playing with his kids, *Saturday Night Live* getting its highest ratings ever when he hosted. In a few months, he

would go to the Olympics in Barcelona as the megawatt member of the legendary Dream Team, its undeniable Elvis.

The argument kept getting made without rebuttal: With No. 23 jerseys being spotted in China, the Middle East, deep Africa, Jordan had become the most famous man in the history of the planet. This night, he had gone out to get a pregame manicure, and a crowd streamed behind him as he crossed the street. A TV crew interviewed the manicurist. She said he had big hands.

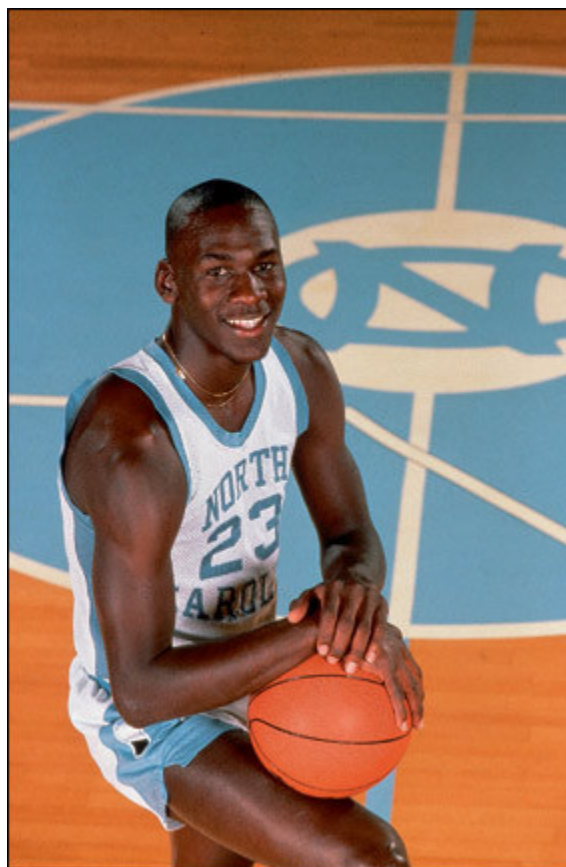
I came upon Jordan telling this story in the cramped visitors locker room at Miami's old downtown arena. This was during the 45-minute period before the game when NBA locker rooms are open to the media, and at the tail-end of an era that league executives look back on as a halcyonic sliver of bliss. In the years before his father was gunned down and Jordan left to play minor-league baseball and revelations of his gambling losses made him refer to the media with a derisive "you guys," Jordan would sit before his locker for the full 45, answer all questions, fill the notebooks of columnists in need of early copy and TV stations in need of early tape. His example set the tone for the entire league, and when Jordan soured so did the rest of the boys who wanted to be like Mike. Go to an NBA locker room before a game today in search of a star, and you half-expect tumbleweeds to skitter over your feet.

"It becomes a big spectacle whenever I make a move," he was saying when I joined the half-dozen reporters circling around his chair. A man held a microphone to his lips. All of it was being videotaped; the cameraman broke the most basic rule of journalistic self-respect by interrupting to ask Jordan to sign his lens. Jordan waited for someone to call the man off, then shrugged and scribbled, saying, "You guys are something." He has always been smart enough to know that he didn't "deserve" his renown. When a parent would enthuse that he wanted his boy to be like him, Jordan would cringe.

"I didn't plan this," he would tell them. "I stumbled upon it." It had been a couple years since we'd spoken. Within seconds it was clear that Jordan's early joy -- the kick of fame -- was gone. He spent most of his days surrounded by people he couldn't understand. "It's amazing what a name on a piece of paper, a name on a lens, can do for so many people," he said. "I never once, in my whole life, had the urge to ask for an autograph. When I saw **Sidney Poitier** from a distance, it wasn't like I had to run up and say, 'How you doin'? My name is Michael Jordan.' I'd look at him. I admired him. But I would keep on. That was just me."

He spoke of how he could trust almost none of the smiling faces, the agents, the media, the businessmen who filled his time off court. His friends were held by a common thread. The mortician, the insurance salesman, the supermarket supervisor, the lawyer: All of them came from his hometown or college, all of them were people he knew before 1983 -- the year he emerged as a college sensation. "They don't treat me differently," he said. "They're the reality of my life."

One by one, the other reporters drifted off, and suddenly it was just us, alone. I had always thought Jordan's eagerness to talk in the past was just so much idle patter, or at worst the celebrity trying to show off how he hasn't changed. But then I asked him to confirm a story, my favorite because it's so innocent in its arrogance, so



Before he became the greatest basketball player in history, Michael Jordan's fondest memories were as a student-athlete at North Carolina.

Manny Millan/SI

fun.

During the off-season between his freshman and sophomore years, Jordan had been crossing campus in street clothes, heading back to his apartment, when he came upon a group of fratboys playing pick-up ball. "Michael, play with us!" they yelled, and when he demurred because he couldn't risk getting hurt, one guy sang out, "Come on, Mike, I want to tell my grandkids I played ball with Michael Jordan" and threw the ball at his feet.

At that, Jordan set down his bookbag and threw up a jumper that dropped through the net like a stone. Then he picked up his bag and said, over his shoulder, "Tell 'em that." By the time I finished repeating this tale, everything about Jordan had changed. He had spent the previous half hour answering questions about the playoffs, being a role model, but now he sat back. A smile broke across his face. He began talking almost to himself, falling into the closest approximation of the word reverie that I'd ever seen.

"That was about a half-court shot," he said slowly. "About a half-court shot ... That was pretty funny ... " His voice had lost all its professional edge, all that authority Jordan had picked up without even knowing it. Then he went quiet. I asked if it was hard to remember such a thing.

"Those are times I try to remember," he said. "It's not tough remembering those days, especially with what I deal with all the time now. It's not tough."

So I sat down next to him, and we went back. We started talking about those days, the people we knew. The Barcelona Olympics were coming in a few months: I speculated that it would be a long time before he could have that kind of life again. "I know," he said, blowing out the words in a whisper. "I've progressed to the point where you have to monitor everything that you do. I go to get my nails done, and people sit out there 45 minutes ... an hour ... "

I mentioned one guy we knew, Scott ... something, and for a few moments we both sat there hemming and gasping -- "Man! What is it?" -- trying to remember his last name. Once, in the summer after Jordan's freshman year, when I was tending bar and emptying garbage cans, Scott took me over to Granville Towers and we engaged in an absurd, shouted conversation in the parking lot with Jordan dangling out his apartment window. "The one who dressed up as a girl?" Jordan said, and he started to laugh. And then Jordan put his hand on my arm and squeezed in the effort to remember, and he left it there, squeezing, squeezing, as we spoke, as if it were much too important a fact to let go. The locker room was closing. He had a game to play. But he needed to get back there.

"Scott ... Scott .. Remember? The guys who were homecoming queens?" Jordan said, his words picking up pace. "Those guys went to high school with me. One guy was **Steve Latham**, and the other .. I can't remember his name ... Kendall! Scott Kendall!"

Now we both were laughing, with the effort and the remembering and the way we had reeled in the memory. Sure: Scott Kendall wearing a dress.

"That was the best time of my life, in college," Jordan said. "I was able to do whatever I wanted, yet I was still enjoying the success of playing basketball for a big Division I school and a very promising career. The best time of my life ... " He stopped and stared for a moment. "And I skipped out on my last year."

Now I knew. We weren't friends, not at all, but all those years when Jordan would feed me gossip or insider knowledge or just a heartfelt quote, he wasn't being generous. The money and fame had twisted his life into something unrecognizable, and though he was anything but tortured -- fame fit him like an immaculate suit -- Jordan needed to see faces like mine. He had known me then. I was a whiff of home.

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