

Michael Jordan: A Profile in Failure

Despite being the best basketball player – and one of the best athletes – of all time, success was not always a slam dunk for the Jumpman

Jeff Stibel

About this Text

Jeff Stibel is a brain scientist, author, and businessman. With his partner Kobe Bryant, he founded Bryant Stibel to support others starting new businesses. In this text, Stibel discusses Michael Jordan's failures. **As you read, pause to answer the questions beside the text.**

Vocabulary words you will see in this story: apply, despite, distinguish, inspire, relentless

WHOLE CLASS READING

QUESTIONS

[1] Michael Jordan needs no introduction. Something of a legend for turning failure into success, he is the author of the longest quote on my company's failure wall — which was tricky to paint but worth the extra effort:

[2] *I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.*

[3] Most of us don't fail or succeed in the glare of a national spotlight, much less do it thousands of times, with analysts endlessly critiquing¹ every move. Perhaps that's why people love sports: they provide a black and white analogy² for the gray backdrop of life. The ball is in or it's out, the basket is made or missed, the game is won or lost. Watching our favorite stars pull through when the chips are down³ **inspires** us to do the same in our own lives. And no one has **inspired** more sports fans, young and old alike, than Michael Jordan.

Paragraphs 1-3

Think & Share: What does the quote suggest about why Michael Jordan has been so successful?

INDEPENDENT READING

QUESTIONS

[4] The story of Michael Jordan not making his high school team has been told and retold, but continues to **inspire** with each retelling. In 1978, sophomore Michael Jordan tried out for the varsity⁴ basketball team at Laney High School. When the list was posted, Jordan's name wasn't on it. Instead, he was asked to play on the junior varsity team.

[5] The reasoning behind the choice wasn't that Jordan didn't have enough talent or hadn't already **distinguished** himself as an outstanding basketball player. Rather, it came down to seniority, size, and a strategic decision: The varsity team already had eleven seniors and three juniors. That left space for only one more player, and the coaches chose another sophomore, Jordan's friend Leroy Smith. Smith was not as good as Jordan but he added size to the team, as he was 6'6" compared to Jordan's diminutive 5'10". What's more, the coaches knew that if Jordan had been chosen for the varsity team, he would play only when needed as a substitute for the more senior varsity players. On the junior varsity team he would get more playing time and a chance to truly develop.

Paragraph 4

Write: What happened when Michael Jordan tried out for the varsity basketball team?

¹ **Critique** (verb): to examine carefully or call out mistakes and errors

² **Analogy** (noun): a comparison between two things

³ when in a difficult or dangerous situation

⁴ **Varsity** (adjective): the first-string team in a particular sport at a particular school

[6] It was a perfectly logical choice for the coaches to assign Jordan to the junior varsity team for his sophomore year. But 15-year-old Jordan was devastated when the list was posted without his name. In his mind, it was the ultimate defeat, the ultimate failure. “I went to my room and I closed the door and I cried. For a while I couldn’t stop. Even though there was no one else home at the time, I kept the door shut. It was important to me that no one hear me or see me.” Jordan was heartbroken and ready to give up the sport altogether until his mother convinced him otherwise.

[7] After picking himself up off the floor, Jordan did what champions do. He let his failure and disappointment drive him to be better. He played on the junior varsity team, and he worked himself to the limit. “Whenever I was working out and got tired and figured I ought to stop, I’d close my eyes and see that list in the locker room without my name on it, and that usually got me going again.”

Paragraphs 6-7

1. **Write:** How did Jordan react to the results of the tryout at first?

2. **Find Evidence:** Underline two details that show how Jordan’s failure affected the way he played on the junior varsity team.

PARTNER READING

[8] It became a pattern throughout Jordan’s life that a disappointment or setback resulted in a redoubling of effort.⁵ High school rival player Kenny Gattison, who led his team to beat Jordan’s team for the high school state championship, put it this way: “You got to understand what fuels that guy, what makes him great. For most people the pain of loss is temporary. [Jordan] took that loss and held on to it. It’s a part of what made him.”

[9] For most people, public failure becomes public humiliation,⁶ and that leads to retreat. Fear of public speaking is a good example. Few people are psychologically afraid of speaking their mind and even fewer have physical speech impediments⁷ preventing them from doing so. Yet glossophobia, the technical term for speech anxiety, is consistently ranked among the most prevalent⁸ mental disorders, with a reputed 75% of the world’s population experiencing some degree of anxiety around public speaking. Our fears have little to do with speaking, of course, and far more to do with the perceived impact and reaction that our audience may have. But for Jordan and elite⁹ performers like him, the fear of failure and public ridicule is transformed into a drive for success.

[10] The pattern of defeat followed by success would follow Jordan to the University of North Carolina and later to the NBA. His **relentless** drive would lead him to break numerous records and become the most decorated¹⁰ player in the history of the NBA. What’s more, he’s credited with dramatically increasing the popularity of basketball both in the United States and internationally, and **inspiring** the next generation of basketball players including LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, and Kobe Bryant. You can’t think of the word “champion” without thinking of Michael Jordan, and there’s no better proof that failure is simply a stepping stone to success.

QUESTIONS

Paragraph 8

Write: In your own words, rewrite Gattison’s statement about “what fuels” Jordan.

Paragraph 9

Turn & Talk: How do Michael Jordan and other “elite performers” view failure differently from most people?

Paragraph 10

Find Evidence: Underline at least two lasting effects of Michael Jordan’s “**relentless** drive” in basketball.

⁵ increasing your efforts as you try to do something

⁶ **Humiliation** (*noun*): a feeling of great embarrassment when one looks weak or silly

⁷ **Impediment** (*noun*): a physical problem that makes speaking difficult

⁸ **Prevalent** (*adjective*): common for a certain time, place, or group of people

⁹ **Elite** (*adjective*): belonging to a group who have power and influence because of money, knowledge, or special skills

¹⁰ the one who has received the most honors and awards

WHOLE CLASS READING	QUESTIONS
<p>[11] Michael Jordan faced another formidable¹¹ challenge decades later, when he became the owner of the NBA basketball franchise, the Charlotte Bobcats. Jordan had been a minority owner since 2006 but bought the majority stake from Bob Johnson in 2010. At the time, the business was hemorrhaging,¹² so Jordan used his own money to cover the significant operating losses¹³ the team was experiencing.</p> <p>[12] The first season was lackluster¹⁴ but things got worse. In the 2011-2012 season, the team earned a mere 7 wins alongside 59 losses — the worst record of any team ever in the history of the NBA.</p> <p>[13] In addition to — or maybe because of — their disastrous record, the Bobcats had poor community support. The Bobcats brand was synonymous¹⁵ with disappointment, despite having one of the best basketball brands of all time at the helm — Michael Jordan himself.</p> <p>[14] But after the 2012-2013 season came to a close, Jordan started to turn things around. First, he brought in former Lakers assistant coach Steve Clifford to replace Mike Dunlap. In a change every bit as important as the new coach, Jordan agreed to remove himself from the process of managing the team’s operations.</p> <p>[15] Instead, Jordan focused on what Jordan can do better than anyone else: revitalizing¹⁶ the brand. He applied for and received permission to change the team name to the Charlotte Hornets. Jordan himself became more involved in community events and forged a connection between the team and the city.</p> <p>[16] The changes paid off. The team finished the 2013-2014 season with a winning record of 43-39, the second best year in the history of the franchise. They even made it to the playoffs. At the same time, ticket and merchandise sales skyrocketed¹⁷ and public opinion improved dramatically. The team was well on its way to making both a comeback and a profit.</p>	<p>Paragraph 11 Think & Share: When Jordan bought the Charlotte Bobcats, how were they doing as a business?</p> <p>Paragraphs 12-13 Find Evidence: <u>Underline</u> two of Michael Jordan’s failures as the new owner of the Bobcats.</p> <p>Paragraphs 14-16 1. Find Evidence: <u>Underline</u> three things Jordan did to lead the team to their “second best year.”</p> <p>2. Write: What do paragraphs 14-15 suggest is an important part of success?</p>

PARTNER READING	QUESTIONS
<p>[17] Most of us look to successful people and assume they can do anything because of their past successes. The old joke about asking your doctor for stock tips comes to mind, as if just because you can cure an illness, you have wisdom about everything. Doctors don’t make great stockbrokers,¹⁸ brain surgeons are horrible rocket scientists, CEOs aren’t usually exceptional cooks, and basketball stars are rarely great baseball players (you can ask Jordan about that last one as well).¹⁹ Experience and knowledge are only valuable where applicable.</p>	<p>Paragraph 16 Turn & Talk: What point is the author making about a person who is extremely good at one thing?</p>

¹¹ **Formidable** (*adjective*): very powerful, impressive, or even frightening

¹² losing a large amount of something, like money, in the same way one might lose a lot of blood from a serious injury

¹³ when a company is spending more money than it earns

¹⁴ lacking greatness, unimpressive; average and dull

¹⁵ **Synonymous** (*adjective*): having the same or nearly the same meaning as another word

¹⁶ **Revitalize** (*verb*): to put new energy or strength into something

¹⁷ **Skyrocket** (*verb*): to increase very quickly; to take off

¹⁸ Stockbrokers advise other people on how to earn more money. This is called giving someone a “stock tip.”

¹⁹ In 1994, Jordan retired from the Chicago Bulls to play minor league baseball. He quit after only one year to return to basketball.

[18] This mindset doesn't just fog our external lenses,²⁰ it also blurs how we see ourselves. It is often hard for successful people to admit that they won't be good at something new. In Jordan's case, his basketball skills didn't translate into basketball management. It took some time, but Jordan certainly deserves credit for acknowledging²¹ what wasn't working and trying new things until he hit on a winning combination. He gave up managing and focused on marketing, a skill he was uniquely qualified for. For Jordan, that became the recipe for success:

[19] *It's harder than most people think. Some people have been in this business a lot longer and still haven't put together a sustainable, successful scenario. When you make bad decisions, you learn from that and move forward. I think I'm better in that sense. I've experienced all of the different valleys and lows about ownership and the success of businesses. Does that constitute me being a better owner? Then I guess I am.*

[20] Hard, yes, but flexing a new muscle²² is also exhilarating,²³ especially when you eventually succeed. As Jordan puts it, "...it's been fun. It's been hard, but I've had fun doing it."

Paragraphs 18-20

1. **Write:** According to Jordan, what makes him "better" at success?

2. **Find Evidence:** Underline one example of how Jordan showed this ability.

"Michael Jordan: A Profile in Failure" by Jeff Stibel. Copyright © 2017 by Jeff Stibel. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

²⁰ make it difficult for us to see other people clearly

²¹ **Acknowledge** (*verb*): to accept or admit that something is true

²² trying out or spotlighting a new skill

²³ **Exhilarating** (*adjective*): exciting and energizing

Name:

Period:

Date:

EXIT TICKET for "Michael Jordan: A Profile in Failure"

Step 1

Directions: *Answer the multiple choice questions below.*

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. PART A: What is a central idea in the article? **[RI.2]**
 - A. Michael Jordan inspired many through his skills and talents on the basketball court.
 - B. Michael Jordan inspired many through his message that failure is not necessary for success
 - C. Michael Jordan succeeded through failure after adopting the attitude that failing and failure can lead to success.
 - D. Michael Jordan succeeded through failure after adopting the attitude that taking no risks and doing safe things can lead to success.
2. PART B: Which detail from the article best supports the answer to Part A? **[RI.1]**
 - A. "Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "The story of Michael Jordan not making his high school team has been told and retold, but continues to inspire with each retelling." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "The pattern of defeat followed by success would follow Jordan to the University of North Carolina and later to the NBA." (Paragraph 10)
 - D. "It is often hard for successful people to admit that they won't be good at something new." (Paragraph 18)
3. Which of the following provides the best summary of the article? **[RI.2]**
 - A. When he failed to make the varsity team, Michael Jordan let the bad news devastate him, causing him to spend the afternoon crying in his room. Later that day, his mother encouraged him to play junior varsity.
 - B. When he failed to make the varsity team, Michael Jordan let the rejection devastate him, causing him to give up and allowing the failure to ruin his career. Later in life, after making bad decisions with business, he refused to change, continued to make mistakes, and lost his money.
 - C. When he failed to make the varsity team, Michael Jordan let the devastation drive him to work harder, using the rejection to push himself to succeed. Later in life, he increased the popularity of basketball, won many awards, and inspired a new generation of basketball players.
 - D. When he failed to make the varsity team, Michael Jordan let the rejection drive him to double his efforts, using failure to push himself to be better. Later in life, after making bad decisions with business, he learned from these mistakes, made new choices, and continued to succeed.
4. Which of the following best describes how the author develops the connection between success and failure in the article? **[RI.3]**
 - A. The author establishes Michael Jordan as a successful player due to long hours of practices and pure talent and skill.
 - B. The author reports statistics from Michael Jordan's basketball record to prove he was both a success and a failure at the sport.
 - C. The author highlights key events in Michael Jordan's basketball career to show how moments of failure or rejection pushed him harder.
 - D. The author describes what happened at Michael Jordan's junior varsity games to show how he used missed opportunities to push him harder.

Step 2

Directions: Summarize the article in 4-5 sentences. [RI.2]

SUMMARY

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.