# Shorts in Literature

**Bruce Emra** 



SECOND EDITION

## **Experiencing the Thrill of Competition Through Stories, Poems, and Nonfiction**





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## **DEDICATION**

To Raymond B. Walters, who asked me to do the first edition of *Sports in Literature* 

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## **PREFACE**

"[Sports] can provide many of the same emotional satisfactions as art: the reassuring unities of time and place and action, sudden reversals of fortune and a cathartic close, not to mention the consolations of order and lots of vicarious thrills—and all of this in real time . . . Sports offers a primal drama whose depiction of characters and character require no metaphors, no allegories, no purple prose; a drama in which perfection is not an abstract concept but a palpable goal—a goal as simple as the perfect hit, the perfect shot, the perfect game."

Michiko Kakutani, in the New York Times Magazine

"Of course, there are those who learn after the first few times. They grow out of sports. And there are others who were born with the wisdom to know that nothing lasts. These are the truly tough among us, the ones who can live without illusion, or without even the hope of illusion. I am not that grown-up or up-to-date. I am a simpler creature, tied to more primitive patterns and cycles. I need to think something lasts forever, and it might as well be that state of being that is a game; it might as well be that, in a green field, in the sun."

A. Bartlett Giamatti, Former Commissioner of Baseball

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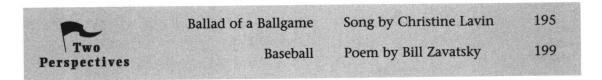
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## GHAPTER 1

### The Moment Itself

"Once again the ball was where it should have been—in Jordan's hands with the clock running down." Those are the words of New York Post writer Kevin Kernan, covering the sixth game of the 1998 National Basketball Association Championship Series between the Chicago Bulls and the Utah Jazz. With 5.2 seconds remaining in the game, Michael Jordan drove toward the basket, pulled up, shot a clean jumper, and the game was over—the Bulls won the game, the series, and their sixth championship.

That was Jordan's last jumper in the NBA. For one final moment he demonstrated again his unparalleled ability to electrify a crowd and dominate a game. Of Jordan's final shot, Kernan wrote, "Jordan seemed to stay in the air to admire his handiwork."

Perhaps Jordan hoped he could freeze the moment itself in time.

Beginning with two selections that pay tribute to the greatest basketball player who ever lived, this chapter offers a look at sports ranging from baseball, basketball, and football to field hockey, track, swimming, rowing, and fishing. Each selection will put you inside the sports moment—the moment itself.

From "Down the Stretch, Michael Decides He'll do It Himself" by Kevin Kernan, *The New York Post*, June 15, 1998. 1998 Copyright, NYP Holdings, Inc. Reprinted with permission from the NEW YORK POST.



### In Beijing Students' Worldview, Jordan Rules

Elisabeth Rosenthal

### You Don't Imitate Michael Jordan

David Remnick

From the student dorm room of a Chinese university to the asphalt courts of New York City, fans the world over salute America's king of basketball.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR • ABOUT THE AUTHOR • ABOUT THE AUTHOR • ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**E**lisabeth Rosenthal is one of the two reporters in the Beijing,<sup>1</sup> China, bureau of the New York Times. She was born in 1957 and has a bachelor's degree from Stanford University and an MD from Harvard, though she doesn't practice medicine anymore. "I started in journalism as a medical writer and have gradually branched out to other topics," she says.

Rosenthal adds, "In Beijing, I cover anything and everything—from politics, to movies, to economics, to sports. Most Chinese teenagers I have met are fanatical about Michael Jordan—they have posters, tee-shirts, sneakers, everything—and I'd been trying to think of a creative way to cover the craze. On the morning of the last N.B.A. playoff game last spring I called a student I knew at Beijing University—a young Communist Party member, even—and asked him if I could come watch the game with him and his friends. He said sure, and snuck me into the undergraduate dorm to watch the game."

#### In Beijing Students' Worldview, Jordan Rules

It was class time at Beijing University, but at 10 this morning seven guys in shorts and T-shirts crowded around a color TV in dorm room 511, a spare cement cubicle decorated with three metal bunkbeds and yesterday's laundry. Nine student "shareholders" had bought the TV last month in anticipation of just such an occasion, and now hoots and jeers filled the air.

"Aya, that Malone he plays dirty."

"Nice ball. Go Rodman!"

"They're losing with three minutes to go. I can't stand it. Hit me with a hammer!"

<sup>1.</sup> Beijing (bāˈjingˈ): capital city of the People's Republic of China.

Minutes later, half a world away, the Chicago Bulls clinched their sixth National Basketball Association championship with a final basket with only five seconds to play. The students jumped to their feet and began a refrain: "Qiao Dan, Qiao Dan, Qiao Dan,"

Qiao Dan, of course, is Michael Jordan. Sure, Bill Clinton, president of the world's most powerful nation, is about to visit China. But to the Chinese, Michael Jordan remains America's king.

Mr. Clinton's state visit this month has brought out citizens' interest in all things American, from books to clothes to movie stars. But these all seem like passing fancies compared to the intense passion that Chinese, especially young Chinese, have developed for Michael Jordan and American basketball.

"Michael Jordan is much more famous than Clinton here," said Cheng Qian, 20, a Bulls fan and shareholder in the TV set who is a management major at Beijing University.

The Chinese have named him kongzhong fieren—"space flier." In the last week, businessmen, retired teachers, students, and government officials have all paused to watch him, live on state-run television, as he led the Chicago Bulls to their 4-2 series victory over the Utah Jazz.

When Beijing Meilande Information Company recently asked 1,000 Chinese to name the best-known Americans ever, Michael Jordan came in second, trailing Thomas Edison by just a few percentage points. Behind him were Albert Einstein, Mark Twain and Bill Gates.

On the sidewalks of Jianguomenwai Avenue, vendors sell Michael Jordan posters. In department stores, Michael Jordan books and calendars sit beside those featuring Hong Kong movie stars and the late Chairman Mao.

"Of all American things, basketball is the most popular," said Li Fa, a junior, who could not join the crowd in 511 because he is a Jazz fan. "Everyone knows Michael Jordan."

State television began broadcasting prerecorded NBA games in the early 1990s, and recently switched to live broadcasts. Today, Chinese viewers had three opportunities to see the final playoff game, which the Bulls won 87–86. The first was live at 7:30 A.M., then a taped game at 9 A.M. for late risers, and a replay at 9 P.M.

Chinese are hard pressed to say why they so adore the Bulls and Michael Jordan, who scored 45 points in the final game and was named Most Valuable Player.

"I don't know—because of his skill, and because he alone carries half of the Chicago team," said Li Qixing, 20, another of the TV's shareholders.

American basketball is certainly more colorful than the home-grown variant, where the People's Liberation Army's August 1 team (named for the day the Army was founded) is the reigning champion. In skill and entertainment value, Chinese players are no match for the likes of Dennis Rodman, who played the game with much of his hair dyed green.

Said Han Bai, a junior, sitting on his bunk bed in jeans and a T-shirt, "I couldn't accept this from a Chinese player, but he's an American so we expect it."

And American sportcasts have other attractions.

The students who gathered in 511 on this steamy morning, oohed when they saw Leonardo DiCaprio, star of *Titanic*, sitting at courtside. And, in a room full of male college juniors, the Jazz's cheerleaders, dancing in black leotards, got the thumbs up as well. Heads nodded in approval as Cheng Qian opined,<sup>2</sup> "In this way, the Jazz are better than the Bulls."

<sup>2.</sup> opined: offered an opinion.