By PAMELA SWANIGAN

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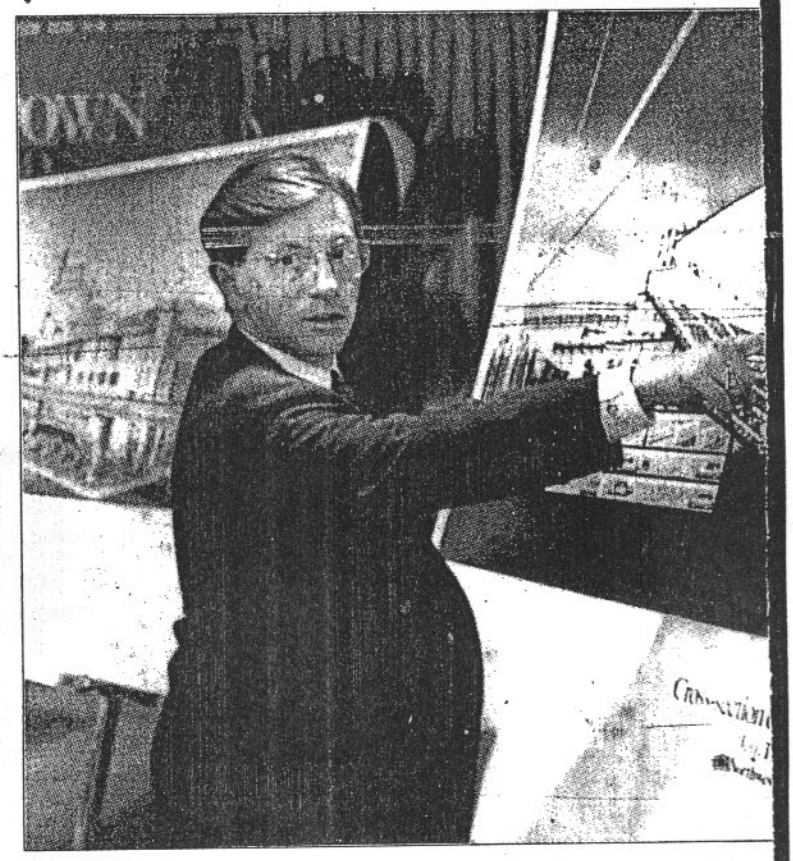


As Vancouver makes plans for a new stadium to house its NBA team, basketball fans and sports media in the United States prepare for the incipient demolition of the sport's greatest shrine, Chicago Stadium.

The requiem for the stadium is also, inevitably, homage to a certain young black male millionaire who played there, who epitomized basketball and what it means to be an athlete. In our expansion giddiness, it is largely the Michael Jordan image of basketball — wealth, celebrity, excitement — that we have absorbed, and that casts such a flattering reflected light on Vancouver.

But those of us who were in Chicago Stadium on April 14, 1993, remember another young black male, named Don Calhoun, who walked into the stadium as a store clerk making minimum wage, was randomly selected out of the audience to try to throw one basketball through one hoop in the Million Dollar Shot contest, and walked out a young black male millionaire.

Up close, the NBA's glamorous glow can shed a harsh light on the gap between rich and poor

And it seems to me that in a country of millions where only a few thousand people make their living as athletes, and where to be young and black and male is to be dead more likely than rich, Don Calhoun also epitomized basketball and what it means to be an athlete.

His one shot captured the lottery essence behind the myth of "if you practise hard enough . . . ." His instant rags-to-riches status mirrored not just the inequities but the skewed priorities of the economic system. And behind our exhilarated reaction was a collective need to believe that in happenstance lies a reality and a solution, and a desire to glorify those who allow us to believe it.

To seasoned sports journalists and stadium regulars, the shot probably seemed like just another oddity in the history of the "Madhouse on Madison." But I had only been to Chicago Stadium once before, and I had come from Toronto, where basketball was being portrayed in cultural isolation.

I wasn't yet used to, nor entirely prepared for, the sharp rub between privilege and powerlessness, chance and certainty, black and white, that makes basketball such an uncanny parallel of American society. In a night that seemed rife with incongruities, I ended up seeing Calhoun's million-dollar shot as an ironic illumination of the side of basketball — and of America — that the media doesn't often show.

Just to be in Chicago Stadium as a journalist was to occupy an uneasy position in an extreme range of status. For the average Chicagoan, getting into the stadium for a Bulls game was close to impossible. By the night of April 14, 1993, Chicago Stadium had been sold out for 281 consecutive games.

Those with the good fortune, the foresight and the money to buy season's tickets constituted the large majority of the audience. Whatever the process was for the rest — I assume the kind of phone derby typical of a rock concert — it couldn't have been easy, because in my trips to Chicago I didn't meet a single non-media member who had been able to see the Bulls play live during Jordan's career.

Journalists, on the other hand, got in for sure, and for free. Our yellow stick-on press passes gave us pre- and post-game locker-room access, a free buffet dinner and seats virtually under the hoop. A long way up the scale from us were the players, who got paid quite well to be there: in the case of stars like Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal, over $60,000 per game.

The placement of Chicago Stadium makes it unusually hard to forget about the people who couldn't have bought tickets even if they'd had the chance. It lies in a poor, peripheral section of the city, a bowl of wealth and glitz and illusion set down like Dorothy's house in a wasteland of deserted warehouses and broken asphalt.

A high chain-link fence surrounds the parking lot outside the players' entrance, protecting the Ferraris, Porsches, Mercedes and BMWs of the athletes and administration. For the people who live in the neighborhood, a Bulls' home game means a chance to come look at the cars.

Press enters the stadium by the same door as the players: the rather surrealistically named Gate 3½. I have no doubt that on most nights, for most of the journalists, walking through this gate was the first step in a process of trying to ignore or erase, by illusions of intimacy, the enormous power discrepancy between themselves and the players.

The impulse, which I feel as strongly as the next, stems from professional necessity as well as egotism — we are, after all, expected to have some insights into the players — but it also means that the pictures we paint in the form of articles or TV broadcasts have a considerable element of self-portrait, and we have a vested interest in making them pretty.

On April 14, 1993, however, a sense of affinity with the athletes was difficult to maintain. Earlier in the day the head coach had closed off the practice session in Deerfield, pulling the blinds over the window between the media room and the gym. By the time the blinds had lifted again, almost all of the players were gone. A dozen of us had wasted several hours of our afternoon that way.

In casual encounters around the practice building and the stadium most of the athletes were unfriendly, apparently bothered by questions about some suspensions that had been handed down that day. Later that evening, they locked themselves into the trainers' room for the full hour of pre-game locker-room access, completely freezing out the media.

For myself and a couple of others, there was an additional separating factor. When I arrived at Gate 3½ I met with two Australian TV sports broadcasters who had flown up to try to get the first-ever Australian interview with Michael Jordan. We had been "acquainted" through mutual phone conversations with a Nike PR officer in Oregon whom none of us knew: she had realized that we would be at the stadium on the same night and had suggested that we meet.

That the sheer celebrity of Michael Jordan could connect four anonymous people from three countries in two hemispheres struck us as amazing but a bit disquieting. It would have been hard, after that demonstration of drawing power, to pretend that we existed anywhere near the same social strata as these athletes.

So I was in a more objective frame of mind than (in truth) I would have liked when I took my mental snapshots of the stadium's inner life:

An efficient, forever unexalted stadium worker saying dryly, "Here's God" when Jordan arrived. Jordan kneeling down to talk a group of wheelchair-bound children for whom he had procured tickets. The other players, one by one, stooping through the doorway gigantic and aloof, disregarding the fans and press and stadium workers and swinging confidently to the cloister of their locker room.

Later, Jordan walking onto the court wearing the shoes for which young Americans killed, stole and went hungry. The free buffet dinner in the basement, served by uniformed black waiters who stood with their hands behind their backs when they weren't working, thinking God knows what about the journalists and feeling — lucky? unlucky? — to be working under the same roof as the likes of Scottie Pippen and Michael Jordan.

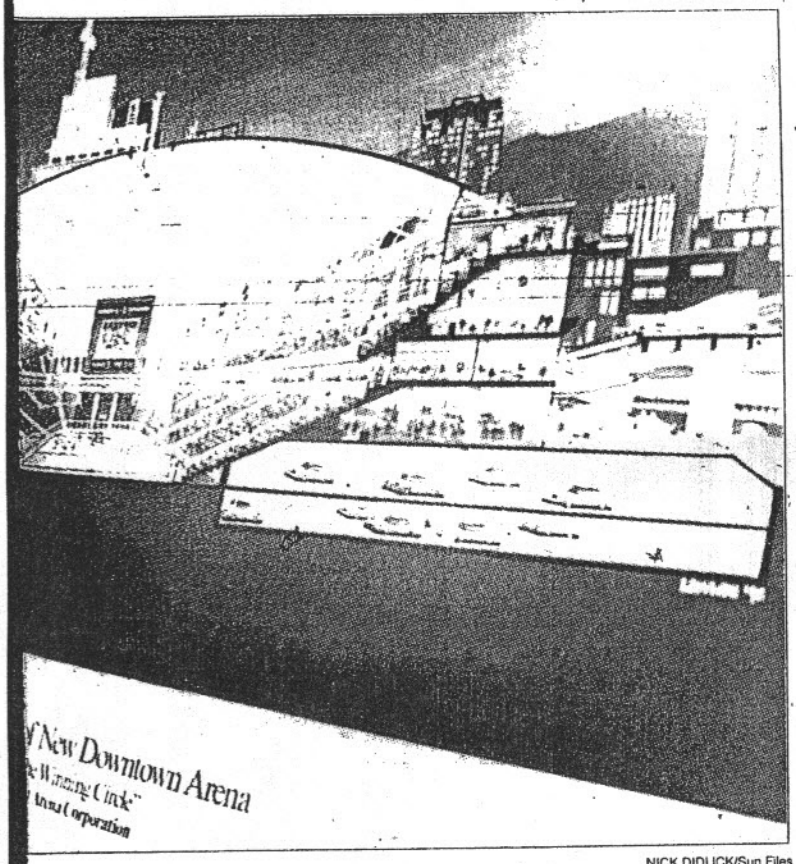
It was apparently traditional to grumble lightly about the plebian nature of the food, but few of the out-of-towners were complaining. I think Chicago as a whole had the effect on outsiders of making a free six-course meal of any sort seem a matter for gratitude.

I was staying on the South Side, and the bus I had taken from the train station the previous night went through one of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in North America. That morning I had seen on the news that four South Side residents who had been alive when I was on the bus had been killed while I slept, in four separate shootings and stabbings. Three of them had been young black males.

The unspoken distinction between newcomers and old hands dissolved somewhat when we went into the locker room and the players disappeared. We stood there for an hour, united in our ineffectuality. One TV sports reporter who was standing by to go live banged on the locked door, without results. As the security guard came to tell us that our hour was up, another jilted reporter muttered tightly: "It better be a good game."

I wonder if anybody in Chicago Stadium that night actually remembers the game. Perhaps some of them: those who were there for their first and only time and were committing every moment to memory, and those whose true interest lay in the sport, not the spectacle. But not many others. It was, until Calhoun's shot, an ordinary night.

Which meant that Jordan was putting on a show — taking and making a lot of shots —



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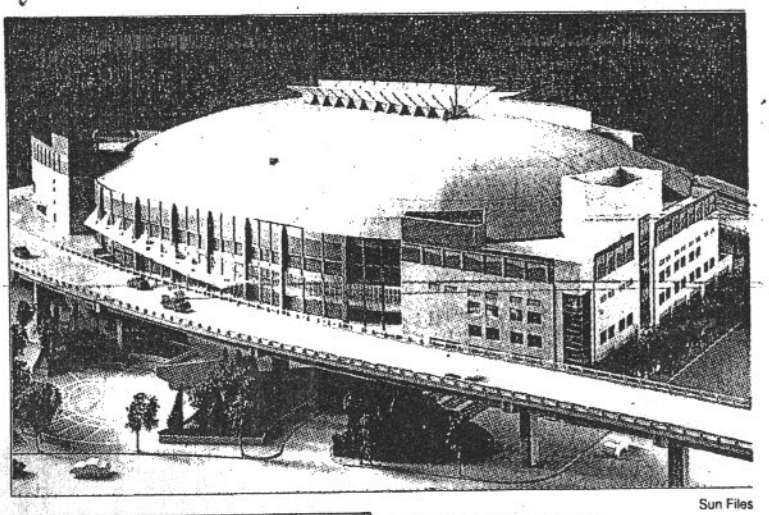

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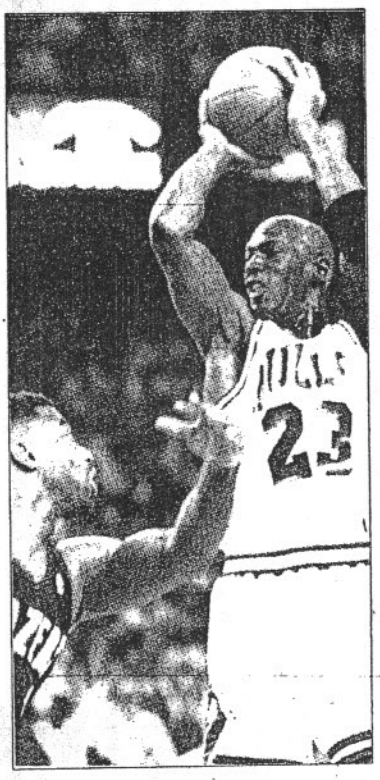

VANCOUVER BASKS in the excitement created by basketball's wealthy superstars, such as Michael Jordan (left, No. 23, now retired), and a glamorous new sports arena (far left, with part-owner Arthur Griffiths, and above)

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and the Bulls were winning. It meant loud: between the 19,000 fans, the blaring of music, the shouts of players and coaches and the rallying cries of the cheerleaders, reporters had to yell at full strength just to talk to the person sitting next to them.

Also, for the rich and the privileged, it meant cold. The Chicago Blackhawks' hockey rink lies under the basketball floorboards, and a numbing iciness slowly made its way up the legs of the players, the media and the spectators who could afford seats at floor level.

Most of all, it meant frenetic activity every second — not just by the players and cheerleaders, but during every time out, when audience contests or diaper derbies or dot races were held, or Bulls t-shirts were slingshotted into the crowd, or male acrobats flipped across the floor, or Barney the mascot danced around encouraging more cacophony.

The air smelled of popcorn. The pom-poms were made of glittery gold. The dot race was sponsored by M&Ms. The announcer mentioned that it was Sears Brand Central Hat Night, and the spectators cheered and waved their new hats in the air. The timing of the contests, the music, the cheerleading, was slick and flawless.

It was during a break in the action near the end of the game that Barney pranced onto the floor holding up a giant cardboard cheque for one million dollars. The million-dollar shot contest, in which an audience member tried to make a basket from the free-throw line at the other end of the court, had been held 18 times before, and only one person had even hit the hoop apparatus.

The journalists in my row were keeping only half an eye on the contestant as they bellowed players' stats at each other. Calhoun, a 25-year-old who worked at a five-and-dime store, stood at the far end of the court. The crowd cheered him. He took a visible breath and threw.

It was a long shot, literally. We all had time to look at the ball, look at the hoop, and see that it was going to go in. And it did go in: nothing but net.

Then everybody was on their feet and screaming. Nineteen thousand people roared. Journalists leapt up and down and hugged each other. The Bulls and the Heat swarmed onto the court, their arms in the air, and piled on Calhoun like he'd just won them the championship. The announcer on the loudspeaker shouted Calhoun's name over and over, so loudly that it was distorted. The volume indicator on every reporter's tape recorder hit the red and stayed there.

It took minutes for the din to subside. For the rest of the game, every time Calhoun moved along the sidelines from on radio or TV interviewer to the next the crowd went crazy again.

Afterwards the locker room was a wild crush of media shoving microphones in the players' faces and all asking the same question: "What did you think of the shot? Michael, what did you think of the shot? Scottie, what did you think of the shot?"

We were high, there's no other word for it. The athletes seemed to have played off their adrenalin. They shrugged and answered more or less the same way: "That was a good shot. I couldn't have made it. A million dollars is a lot of money for one shot."

When the buzz died down and the crush thinned out, reporters asked their usual post-game questions, and the night was over. I walked out with one of the Australians, feeling as if I known him for years.

The stadium seemed very quiet. Our ears were ringing.

"Get your interview?" I asked him. "Yeah," he replied absently. "Did you get what you needed?" "Yeah," I said.

I was thinking about the contest organizers picking Don Calhoun out of the audience because his yellow shoes had caught their eye and had non-marking soles (afterward they had emphasized the importance of the non-marking soles). I thought about the odds of him hitting that basket, and the odds that I should be in Chicago Stadium the night he did it. I thought about the odds of a young black male growing up tall enough and talented enough to make it to the NBA. Growing up at all.

The Australian was silent too, thinking. "A million dollars," he said eventually. "That's a lot of money." He didn't say: For one shot.

We stood for a minute outside Gate 3½. I don't think either of us felt very much like journalists just then.

The parking lot, mostly empty, was blown with litter. Around the corner hulked the shadow of the half-built new stadium. Behind us, back through Gate 3½, a few young black millionaires were still changing into their dress shoes.

It's an easy enough truth that the threshold of Chicago Stadium is a strange part of town, and that America is a strange part of the world. But it is also true that basketball's luminescence sheds a harsher light close to the source that from a distance.

At the moment, the peripheral glow is helping Vancouver look glamorous in the international mirror. But when it gets closer we may find that it also illuminates the social and racial discord from which our city is not exempt, and the gap between rich and poor that is wider here than anywhere else in Canada.

It may turn out that in Vancouver, as in Chicago, the place of basketball may be best represented not by any spectacular moves that the NBA stars make, but by the various ironies of Don Calhoun's million-dollar shot. ✧

Pamela Swanigan is a Vancouver writer.