

The Little Dipper

by Clay Marks

Dear Johnny:

I hope you don't mind if I call you Johnny. It's an endearing gesture. You just seem like a Johnny to me. In fact, an Average Johnny. A.J. for short. It means I like you.

I'm hardly average myself. Pretty much the opposite. For some reason, when you look like I do, people want to give you nicknames. I've had lots of them. My favorite is still The Big Dipper. My friends started calling me that when I was a teenager. Simpler times. My biggest worry was ducking my head when I walked through doorways. I was fond of the name Stilt too.

Honestly, it didn't even bother me when folks referred to me as Goliath. Nobody roots for Goliath though. In fact, Goliath didn't even get to tell his own story. A journalist did. A journalist who identified with David.

I'm getting sidetracked. This letter isn't supposed to be about me. Who am I kidding? Of course it's about me. But it's also about you.

Question number one: How does it feel to have been John Wooden's favorite NBA player? I'll certainly never know. John Wooden was a David. I'm Goliath. Red Auerbach didn't like me either. Invented myths for gullible journalists in order to portray me as a villain. Red was a genuine P.T. Barnum. A little man with a big imagination.

Yep, I was mythical. Sports writers still say it today. And yet they rank Dirk Nowitski ahead of me on their lists of all-time greats. That's because sports writers are Davids.

Despite our obvious differences, you and I have something in common, A.J. You're about as David as it gets. A little man. Underestimated. Still, you're the only other player I can think of with averages as Goliathan as mine.

Question number two: How does it feel to walk down a public street without drawing everyone's attention? Even before I was famous, I got noticed. Everything about me is big. My physical stature. My house on the the most visible promontory in Bel-Air. My sex-appeal. My athletic talent. I'm not just talking about basketball. I excelled at volleyball and track-and-field as well. They say I had a big ego too. Sure, the same folks who call me mythical say I had a big ego.

Alright, I had a tendency to exaggerate. The entire world knows I once boasted of having bedded 20,000 women. After my death, Jerry West shot down that myth. He called me the loneliest man he's ever known. Talk about exaggeration. Trust me, The Big Dipper was mythical in the bedroom; we'll just leave it at that. The statistics really don't matter.

Speaking of statistics, you accumulated a few during your playing career, didn't you? You got Jerry West's attention. Pat Riley's too. Both consider you to be on the short list of most valuable players during professional basketball's "Golden Era." I'm betting Karl Malone has a similar sentiment. "He did more for me than I did for him," he said on the night your jersey was retired by the Jazz. I agree completely. The Mailman scored more points in his career than I did. A person would have been called crazy to predict that when he was drafted in 1985.

But, remarkable as the two-time MVP's accomplishments were, your numbers are even more astounding. You quietly did two things better than any player before or since, without ever patting yourself on the back. Your 3265 steals are the all-time best – 751 more than Michael Jordan, 1404 more than Isiah Thomas, and 1541 more than Magic Johnson. It's undoubtedly news to a lot of fans that you also tallied more career points (19,711) than Thomas or Johnson. And since we're on the subject, that total is 5000 more than my supposed nemesis, Bill Russell, can claim.

Do I even need to mention the Goliath in the room? Your 15,806 assists? The number is staggering. Even more amazing is that your intangibles were just as impressive. Every time I watched you play, you were the most important player on the floor because of your ability to control tempo and manage the clock. The only comparison I can make is Oscar Robertson. If I were Jerry Sloan, I never would have taken you out of the game. I'm sure it would have shortened your career, but to hell with longevity. A guy with your gifts deserves a title.

Truth is, you have no peers. As Jerry West observed, that can be a lonely thing. I relate to your predicament. You see, I was already a ten year vet when Kareem was drafted by the Bucks. Until then, I was the most dominant performer in the association by light years, and that includes Bill Russell. We never double teamed Russell. Didn't have to. He wasn't even the most dangerous player on his own team.

I outscored Russell three to one, outrebounded him three to two. I blocked thousands more shots than he did. Yes, thousands. Had blocked shots been an official stat when I was in my prime, I would be number one by an untouchable margin. I was accumulating triple doubles before the terminology was even invented. I have to remind Red Auerbach every time I see him that I led the league in blocked shots when I was 35 years old. Russell never led the league in blocked shots once. Hell, I led the league in assists in 1968. I'm obviously the career leader in quadruple doubles, but it's not in the record books because no one was keeping track, and most of the games aren't on film.

Some perspective. In 1962, when I was a Philadelphia Warrior, I averaged 50 points and 27 rebounds per game for an entire season. I guarantee you I blocked ten shots a night too. And I finished second in the MVP voting behind Bill Russell. Does that sound as preposterous to you as it does to me? I said it before. Sports writers are Davids. TV and

radio broadcasters. Fans are Davids. Referees. Commissioners. General Managers. Publicly and privately, they all thought I was selfish.

No one ever said that about you, did they? You're just an Average Johnny. Unselfish to a fault. Like Russell. Only Russell didn't have stats as gargantuan as yours. Still, you never even sniffed an MVP. That's because you played in a much different league than I did.

Question number three: Do you remember what NBA basketball was like in the mid to late '70s after I retired? Of course you don't. Nobody does. No one was watching. Playoff games didn't even air in prime time. They were re-broadcast at 10:30 at night. The association was floundering financially. In 1975, Rick Barry put on a show in the NBA Finals. Displayed one of the finest performances ever when his Golden State Warriors swept the heavily favored Washington Bullets. But no one remembers. Because no one watched it.

Question number four: Do you realize that Jerry West wanted to select Sidney Moncrief with the number one overall pick in 1979? A defensive specialist? Lakers owner Jerry Buss vetoed West's evaluation. "This is Hollywood," he said.

Enter Earvin Johnson.

You know, a lot of Davids like to put me and Magic in the same category. Physical anomalies without peer. I say, "Nah." Magic was coddled by the league. Coddled by referees. Coddled by sports writers and TV broadcasters. A showman certainly. A celebrity. Indeed, a magician. With an entourage of choreographers who directed him to flash his big beautiful smile after he won big beautiful games in Hollywood's big beautiful television market. The survival of the NBA necessitated a dramatic transition that accommodated the Magic man. Traveling violations were ignored. It was permissible to palm the ball. He got hand checked at the top of the key and was rewarded three steps later with a two-and-one. Ah yes, don't forget the illegal defense.

Think about that. Defense was illegal. Can you even imagine The Big Dipper playing in a league where you could only double team the ball? I got double teamed for 48 minutes, with and without the ball. Triple teamed. I was so dominant the association changed its rules to make the game more difficult for me. Goal tending. The three-second rule. A widened keyhole. Swarms of mobs did chin-ups on my biceps when I caught an entry pass. A player you've never heard of once drove my two front teeth into the roof of my mouth with his elbow. I swallowed blood. The referees swallowed their whistles.

But I digress.

Enter David. Not the boy, David. But King David. David Stern, that is. Another P.T. Barnum. Suddenly, marketability superseded ability.

Enter Michael Jordan and the era of isolation basketball. Jordan wasn't a Goliathan player. He wasn't peerless. A dozen other guys had his gifts. But, as a promotional icon, that's another story. All the Davids loved Jordan. Worshiped Jordan. Arranged and rearranged stages where His Airness could perform scripted theatrics. Selfish play became the gold standard. It was rewarded. Superstars were officiated differently. Had Jordan lost two teeth, the owner of the offending elbow would have been ejected and given a ten game suspension.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying Michael Jordan didn't have special talent. He should have won ten MVP trophies. All the same, I should have won twelve. In addition to being the most imposing offensive player on the floor for the majority of my career, I was the defensive player of the year every season I played, hands down. The point I'm trying to make is that buffoons like Dennis Rodman were treated more like superstars than I ever was. My worst year in the league was better than Rodman's best year in the league.

I don't feel sorry for myself though. It's happened to other guys. Shaq, for instance. He knows what it feels like to have inferior men doing chin-ups on his forearms. It's still happening to LeBron James. Now there's a player who reminds me of me. When you're bigger and stronger and faster than everyone else, fans sour on you. Davids resent Goliath's dominance. And, in order to optimize revenues, the NBA has to give consumers what they want.

At any rate, I hope I've made myself clear, A.J. Goliath is your biggest fan. I once told Brent Musburger you were the brightest star in the association. My peers cackled. Oh, that's right, I don't have any peers. Neither do you. Had I played alongside you I would have scored 50,000 career points, and you would have had 20,000 assists. A sly fox like you probably would have accumulated 4000 steals too, with a security guard like me behind you protecting the rim.

I know you didn't win a championship, but you earned a title. You're the greatest team player, not just in the history of basketball, but in the history of North American sports. The greatest passer certainly. All the elite quarterbacks have challengers to their numbers. You don't have any. Now I'll be honest with you, I don't know the game of hockey very well, and I'm told Gretsky is without peer too. But I'll stick with what I know. Some might accuse me of exaggerating. It won't be the first time or the last time. Funny, nobody accuses John Wooden of exaggerating when he says exactly the same thing.

Give Jordan his due though. He was spectacular. Indisputably, he's the best commodity ever. Played a game with the flu, shot 30%, and got more press in two days than you got in two decades. You and I never played with the flu, did we? Shit, I played 20 playoff games with a broken wrist one year. West averaged 35 a night with a blown out thumb on his shooting hand. Broke his nose nine times in his career. We didn't announce it to the world. Just went out and played. No excuses.

I'm not accusing Jordan of making excuses. It wasn't his fault he got so much attention. Nevertheless, I haven't spent one second wishing I'd played with him. I'll spend eternity wishing I could play with you. What do you say? Maybe someday? Together we'll form the brightest constellation in the heavens. The Big Dipper and The Little Dipper.

I've already been the greatest basketball player on Earth. With you as my sidekick, I'll be one half of the finest duo in the history of the universe. No exaggeration.

Sincerely,
The Big Dipper