

## Cover Story

# Michael `would be my best friend'

By Debbie Howlett

CHICAGO - If you listen closely, blocking out the laughter of children and the boom of rap music from passing cars, you can hear the faint, sweet sound of Daniel Marshbanks' basketball swishing through a tattered net.

In that moment, on 90 sacred feet of asphalt in the middle of the Cabrini-Green housing project, the gritty backdrop of slum and city melts away.

It's possible, in that one second, for a 15-year-old boy to smile broadly and imagine he might, someday, be just like Michael Jordan.

"I can picture myself in the NBA, shooting the ball clean," Marshbanks says, his soft hands palming a worn orange basketball. "I can see my picture on the front page."

For Marshbanks and a half-dozen friends hanging out in Stanton Park on a clear and sunny afternoon, Jordan's return to the Chicago Bulls is not about playoffs or multi-year contracts or marketing or endorsements. It's an ache for something the kids lost - pride and hope, perhaps - when Jordan walked away from basketball 17 months ago.

"It does matter to me," says Marshbanks, a 5-foot-8, 126-pound strand of wire beneath baggy jeans and oversized T-shirt.

"Instead of being an idol, he was someone you could watch and learn from, like a teacher or your father. I used to watch him on TV and study him. Not just basketball. I wanted to do everything he did."

Jordan's grasp on these boys exceeds the reach of the NBA.

They live just blocks from his popular restaurant. They envy his black Range Rover and red Ferarri. They covet his home, which they know in their hearts is a palace. Most of all, they respect the respect he has won.

It's a powerful image for boys surrounded by towering tenements, where pre-schoolers amuse themselves by smashing empty 40-ounce beer bottles into the pavement and "busters" park themselves on a wood bench to smoke dope.

Shawn Mays, a skinny 13-year-old playing tip-in with Marshbanks and the rest, wears mismatched Air Jordan sneakers. He bought one pair in black, another pair in white, then mixed the two.

"Looks sharp to me," says Mays, who has Jordan sneakers and three Jordan posters in a bedroom he shares with two brothers.

He has a Bulls jersey with number 23 on it - although number 45 will likely be the jersey to get this week - and a Michael Jordan video game. He paid a neighbor \$25 for Jordan's autograph, which may or may not be the real thing.

"I want to meet him so he can be my friend," says Mays, who later stomps home after a short but intense fistfight with a "buster" who took umbrage at one of his endless stream of wisecracks.

But for now he's all smiles and imagination.

"I want him to take me out for eats at his restaurant and let me drive his car. He can teach me to play," Mays says. "He would be a good friend. He would be my best friend."

The park at Ogden Avenue and Evergreen Street is a vast expanse of tar and beaten-down grass surrounded by 12-story high-rises holding 6,900 people. A McDonald's across the street is boarded up, marred by gang graffiti.

At the west end, a grassy ballfield stands vacant. The indoor pool, blue water beckoning, goes unused.

The basketball courts are the center of this universe; dented metal backboards decorated with Chicago Bulls stickers hover like sentries. On the main court, ragged nets hang limp. On two others, steel rims are bent out of shape from countless hanging dunks.

Marshbanks comes here nearly every day after classes at Lincoln Park High School, where he's a freshman who favors science over social studies.

Some days, in the summer and on weekends, he comes out when he wakes up and stays until it's too dark to see the ball.

But he didn't even try out for the school basketball team, afraid he might not make the varsity. He plans to try next year, encouraged by the coach. Told that Jordan didn't get picked for a high school tournament one year, he does a double-take, then smiles.

He practices, alone, the moves he has seen Jordan make, even sticking out his tongue as he glides to the basket. When no one is around to dog him, he works on his dunk, a move he hopes to perfect this summer.

He started playing when he was 9, taught by his brother, Adrian, 16. But his real tutor was Jordan, on a TV screen in the two-bedroom apartment he shares with his brother, sister and single mother.

"I looked for how he makes the move, for when he decides. I watch when he switches hands," says Marshbanks, quiet and self-possessed.

A group of junior high girls sits nearby, watching the boys and gossiping about a pregnant classmate who happens by.

Between bites of Flaming Hot Cheetos, Tasha Simmons, 15, in a University of North Carolina Starter jacket, wonders what it would be like to marry Jordan.

"I'd do anything for him," she says. "He could take us out of the projects, that's for sure."

To youngsters for whom new sneakers are a big deal, it's hard to understand Jordan's switch to baseball, and why it took him so long to return.

Terrell McClinton, 12, worried that without a contract, Jordan might have to start paying for the new, clean white sneakers he's always wearing.

"I heard he only has to pay \$2 for his shoes. He's got more gym shoes than anyone," McClinton tells his friends during a break for water from a rusty fountain.

"That's not the point," Lloyd Byrd, 14, says with a scowl. "He's got the moves. He's got the life. He's got everything. He won't give that up."

For all the excitement of his return, Daniel Marshbanks might concede Jordan has accomplished everything an athlete could possibly hope to. And he understands what it's like not to have your father in the stands cheering.

A chill settles into the air as a 70-degree afternoon gives way to a 40-degree night. Lights begin to pop on in windows all over the projects. The sound of dribbling basketballs is gone as the pop of distant gunfire echoes through these urban canyons.

Marshbanks' thoughts turn to the warmth of his clean but cramped apartment building a block away. He's hungry. His mom, just now home from her computer job, has promised to bring pizza for dinner.

He scoops up his ball and heads home.

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**SUBJECT**

ATHLETE: YOUTH: BASKETBALL

**KEYWORDS**

MICHAEL JORDAN: REACTION: CHICAGO BULLS: DANIEL MARSHBANKS: AGE

**SECTION**

NEWS

**ACCESS**

477778

**ARTWORK**

GRAPHIC,b/w,USA TODAY(Map); PHOTO,color,Anne Ryan,USA TODAY; PHOTO,b/w,Anne Ryan,USA TODAY

**CATEGORY**

Cover Story

**EDITION**

FINAL

**LENGTH**

39 INCHES

**DLINE**

CHICAGO

**NOTES**

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**CUTLINE**

FOR TWO: Daniel Marshbanks, 15, shooting hoop in Chicago PRIDE, HOPE: Daniel Marshbanks, 15, takes a shot. Michael Jordan `was someone ou could watch and learn from, like a teacher or your father.