Name: _____ Date: _____

How the Bulls Won with Michael Jordan

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1091 words

Who is Michael Jordan? He is a retired basketball player, born in Brooklyn in 1963 and raised in North Carolina. In 2026, he is 63. He won six NBA championships with the Chicago Bulls between 1991 and 1998. Yet for his first six seasons he won no title at all. This book asks why that changed. What did the Bulls do differently? What did teammates and coaches say about it on the record? And how is one famous night in 1997 documented?

From 1988 to 1990, the Detroit Pistons knocked Chicago out of the playoffs three years in a row. Detroit's coach, Chuck Daly, later told Sports Illustrated how they played Jordan. "If Michael was at the point, we forced him left and doubled him." Another rule was this: "any time he went by you, you had to nail him." The plan got a nickname, the Jordan Rules. In 1990, the Bulls came one game short of the Finals, and Detroit went on to win the title.

Daly also said, in that 2007 interview, that the plan stopped working. "Michael simply found other guys when we ganged up on him," he said. Chicago had also changed coaches. Doug Collins coached the Bulls through 1988-89, when they lost to Detroit again. In 1989-90, Phil Jackson took over and won 55 games in his first season. His staff included Tex Winter, who had written a book in 1962 about an offense built on team play and movement.

Winter's offense is called the triangle because of its shape. On one side of the floor, a big player stands near the basket with two teammates spread beside him. The other two players hold the far side. The team calls no set plays. When the defense changed, the next pass changed with it. In the NBA's words, "players reacted to the defense, passed the ball and moved until the best shot presented itself."

Teammates described the change in plain terms. John Paxson said, "Phil and Tex believed you weren't going to win championships with one player dominating the ball all of the time." Steve Kerr, who joined the Bulls in 1993, said, "You can't afford to have the ball in one person's hands." Scottie Pippen said that Jordan "would have had to somehow change his game to become the winner he became." Winter also persuaded Jackson to use Jordan more in the post, near the basket. That wore him down less.

Winter's own view of his work was modest. "You'd be an idiot to say that the triangle created Michael Jordan," he said. "But it certainly helped him get to where he got." Early on, Sports Illustrated reports, Jordan was reluctant to credit the triangle. But he agreed, in a statement after Winter died in 2018: "His triangle offense was a huge part of our six championships." Sports Illustrated counted 11 titles in 19 years for the Bulls and the Lakers, who later used it too.

The first title came in 1991. Chicago swept Detroit in the East finals and beat the Lakers four games to one, for the first title in the team's 25-year history. In Game 5, Jordan had 10 assists. The Lakers kept sending two defenders at him, so he kept passing to John Paxson, who hit five shots in a row. "We as a team, we as a unit, we accomplished it together," Jordan said. Jackson called the series "a tribute to Michael Jordan."

The best-known example came on June 20, 1993, in Game 6 of the Finals at Phoenix. Chicago trailed by two points. Jordan was double-teamed, so he passed to Pippen, who drove toward the basket. When a Phoenix player stepped over to stop him, Pippen passed to Horace Grant. Grant passed back out to Paxson, who made a three-pointer with 3.9 seconds left. Chicago won, 99 to 98, for a third title in a row. "Once Paxson got the ball," Jordan said, "I knew it was over."

People remember his scoring, but the record also shows his defense. In 1987-88, he was named Defensive Player of the Year and Most Valuable Player in the same season. Nine times, he was chosen for the All-Defensive First Team. In 1995-96, the Bulls won 72 of 82 games, and Basketball-Reference ranked them first in the league on offense and on defense, measured in points scored and allowed per 100 possessions. Jordan also led the league in scoring that year.

Game 5 of the 1997 Finals, on June 11 in Salt Lake City, is among the best-documented games of his career. The series was tied, two games each. Jordan had become sick between Games 4 and 5. NBA.com says he "looked lost in the first quarter." Utah led 29 to 16 after it. Jordan then scored 17 in the second quarter and finished with 38 points. A three-pointer in the last half minute gave Chicago a lead it kept, 90 to 88. Pippen helped him off the floor.

What made him sick? The record does not settle it. On the broadcast, Marv Albert said "flu-like symptoms." The next day, a Chicago Tribune columnist wrote of the "officially diagnosed viral gastroenteritis," a stomach illness. Years later, Jackson linked it to altitude: "I think coming back down out of altitudes helped him," he said in 2012. He added that guard Ron Harper "always said that it was bad pizza." Trainer Tim Grover said in 2013, "Guaranteed. Not the flu." Author David Halberstam wrote in 1998 that no one was "ever quite sure."

The 1998 Finals ended with another scene built from a steal. In Game 6, on June 14 in Salt Lake City, Utah led 86 to 85 with 18.9 seconds left. Jordan took the ball from Karl Malone in the post and dribbled up the court. After a crossover and what NBA.com calls "a slight shove of Bryon Russell," he made a jumper with 5.2 seconds left. The basket counted, and Utah did not score again. Chicago won, 87 to 86.

By the record, Chicago played in six Finals with Jordan and won all six. He averaged 33.6 points in those Finals. Basketball-Reference's career Finals list, through November 2026, puts that second, behind Rick Barry's 36.3 in two Finals. Phil Jackson has noted that Jordan never

played a seventh game in the Finals. Daly gave one more reason for the Bulls' rise. He credited Pippen's growth: "eventually Scottie Pippen evolved into Scottie Pippen." The Bulls had a system, a defense, a second star and a first one, and the sources do not rank them.

Questions

1. What did Chuck Daly say Detroit did when Jordan was at the point?

A. They forced him left and doubled him
B. They let him shoot alone
C. They left him open on the right

2. In the phrase "one player dominating the ball," what does dominating mean?

A. Dropping
B. Controlling
C. Hiding

3. Who made the pass that went directly to John Paxson before his shot in Game 6 of the 1993 Finals?

A. Scottie Pippen
B. Michael Jordan
C. Horace Grant

4. What did Tex Winter say about the triangle offense and Jordan?

A. It created Jordan
B. It helped Jordan but did not create him
C. It slowed Jordan down

5. Why do the book's sources treat the cause of Jordan's illness in 1997 as disputed?

A. Different people named different causes
B. No one watched the game
C. Jordan did not play

6. What does Daly's remark that "Michael simply found other guys" suggest?

A. Jordan stopped playing hard
B. Jordan passed to open teammates when defenders crowded him
C. Jordan kept shooting every time

Words to know

swept: won every game
assists: scoring passes
dominating: controlling
altitude: height above sea
gastroenteritis: stomach illness

Answer key: How the Bulls Won with Michael Jordan

1. A. They forced him left and doubled him
2. B. Controlling
3. C. Horace Grant
4. B. It helped Jordan but did not create him
5. A. Different people named different causes
6. B. Jordan passed to open teammates when defenders crowded him