

April 18, 1994-----

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. ---- Michael Jordan spent most of his professional sports career flying over America. It's an efficient but detached form of travel.

But by riding the highways of the Southern League, Air Jordan comes down to earth. He bobs and weaves within us. Some of us are hitchhikers; others are roadside attractions. But we all belong to the road.

Welcome back, Michael.

Jordan thinks there is too much fuss about the bus he acquired for his Class AA Birmingham Barons teammates.

"The bus thing has been overplayed," Jordan said. "This isn't the first time I ever rode on a bus. Maybe they're longer trips, but I'll find peace with myself in a sense. No one can stop me, jump on me or bother me on the bus. It's become kind of a heaven for me."

Heaven left Birmingham Thursday morning for a road trip that took the Barons 140 miles north to Chattanooga, Tenn., and 450 miles east to Zebulon, N.C. The team returns 557 miles to Birmingham immediately after Tuesday night's game against the Carolina Mudcats.

Whenever the Barons depart from Birmingham, the itinerary dictates they meet at their ballpark, Hoover Metropolitan Stadium in suburban Hoover. Most of the Barons arrived around 8 a.m. Thursday. They relaxed in the comforting morning sun, outstretched between small mountains of duffel bags, boom boxes and baseball dreams.

Jordan arrived around 8:15, pulling up alone in a black Ford Mustang. He parked his car, opened the trunk and removed two black sports bags. Jordan did not carry a pillow, a staple of minor league travel.

The Barons' \$350,000 green and purple bus arrived a few minutes later, and players began to file on. Dale Richardson has been the Barons bus driver for the last four years. Richardson's conservative estimate is that he covers 50,000 miles a season.

Jordan gingerly stepped into the dark gray and purple interior of the bus, looked outside at some lingering teammates, smiled and shouted, "Load 'em up; let's go!"

At 8:40 a.m. the bus left Hoover.

The drive from Birmingham up I-59 is a beautiful run through the deep green southern tip of the Appalachian Mountains. The trip takes a little more than 2 1/2 hours, or five Waffle Houses and two Huddle Houses.

The bus did not stop.

"We can go up to 70 miles an hour," said Richardson, 59. "It's got a lot of things on it the old bus didn't have. Airplane cooling. Tilt cruise control. And Jake breaks (engine retarders)."

But can Jake Breaks hit?

After seven games, the Barons' team batting average is .226 with one home run. And that's with Steve Sax along for the ride. To say Sax was surly during his Barons rehab would be to curb your words.

The bus rolled by Irondale, a small town just outside of Birmingham where Mr. and Mrs. Billy McMichael run the 60-year-old Irondale Cafe (The Original Whistle Stop Cafe) that was the inspiration for the book and film, "Fried Green Tomatoes." The Thursday special in the cafe by the side of the train tracks included crowder peas, turnip greens, fried pork chops and, yes, fried green tomatoes.

The bus rolled by a Nike Factory Store, just off Route 431 in North Boaz, Ala. The bus rolled by two hitchhikers going north and six bikers going south.

And rolling across the radio was the wacky "Mason-Dixon Morning Show" out of Birmingham.

On the bus, some Barons read and others watched the film "Fast Times at Ridgemont High." Jordan played dominoes.

As the bus came closer to Chattanooga, the sides of several roadside barns advertised stone formations such as "Ruby Falls" and "See Rock City." There's a reason these flashy public notices are popular in this region.

During the 1930s and '40s, rural hucksters offered to paint barns for free. The hook was they also painted the ads.

The Barons arrived in Chattanooga around noon and checked into a \$50-a-night Holiday Inn about 20 miles from the ballpark. It was an older Holiday Inn in a franchise compound featuring Trav-L-Park, Wally's Family Dining Restaurant and, yes, a Waffle House.

For security reasons, reservations for Jordan were made at several local hotels. But he checked in at the Holiday Inn and rode the elevator with his teammates. Before Friday's rainout, he waited for the team bus with teammates in the Holiday Inn

lobby.

Jordan, dressed in black, listened to a Walkman as he sat on a lumpy hotel chair. Lightning crackled across the dark sky behind him. He's already starting to have the muddled look of a minor league ballplayer.

Upon their arrival at the Holiday Inn, Jordan and the Barons ran into the Jordan/Hooters golf tour in the lobby.

The tournament was being held at Brown Acres golf course about two miles from the hotel. There were 168 golfers staying at the hotel as well as women from the Hooters restaurant chain.

"They Hooterize the tournament pretty well," golfer Jon Hough said. He said the tournament is named after Pebble Beach golfer Rick Jordan, who is known for his work with younger players.

"Our Jordan knows about that Jordan," Hough said. "We're still on the Double A (just like the baseball Jordan) tour, but we've had a lot of players go on to the (PGA) Tour - guys like Lee Jansen and John Daly."

Once the Barons take residence in their rooms, some grab a light snack, others find a place to work out. They all attempt to establish a routine, especially this early in the season.

"We try to work out twice in each city, depending on travel schedules," said Barons trainer Steve Davis, who was the 1993 Southern League Trainer of the Year. "We'll get up at 10 in the morning and lift, unless we just got off the bus or had an extra-inning game the night before. Each player has a specific (multi-joint) program for baseball. Everyone thinks it's just bench presses. We condition the body for baseball."

After a workout, the Barons will return to the hotel, eat or take a nap. When they arrive at the ballpark, they stretch and do more light conditioning with Davis before batting practice.

Davis tries to find local health clubs for the players when they're away from the visiting ballpark. He said some of the better weight room facilities in the Southern League have been in Charlotte (the ex-Cub and now Cleveland affiliate which last year moved to Class AAA) and Birmingham.

"Knoxville (Toronto) is just horrible," he said. "It's been the same for 30 years. Chattanooga is pretty small (the Cincinnati affiliate plays in a 64-year-old ballpark). But there should never be an excuse not to get your work done on the road."

The Barons left the hotel for Engel Field around 3:30 p.m., seven hours after their

Birmingham departure. Local game time was set for 7 p.m.

Despite a gutsy pitching performance from lefty Larry Thomas, the Barons lost for the sixth time in seven games. The Barons committed three errors, including a throwing miscue by Thomas.

Long after the game ended, a young man sat on a plastic chair talking on the pay phone in the empty lobby of the Holiday Inn. His voice was low, his head lower. It was Thomas, talking to his new bride in Mobile, Ala.

The road trip was one day old.