

This is the first major interview Phil Jackson did in Chicago. He was just an iconoclastic hippie coach from the CBA.

I was reeled in to talk to Phil because i was just an iconoclastic hippie writer at the Chicago Sun-Times.

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Defining Phil Jackson is like trying to defend against adrenalin.

The new head coach of the Bulls had a combination major in philosophy, psychology and religion from the University of North Dakota. He's an eloquent writer, a former vegetarian and a former roommate of the immortal Harthorne Wingo.

Jackson is also the only NBA coach to have doubled off of Hall of Fame pitcher Satchel Paige.

"We played stickball a lot," recalled Charley Rosen, the head coach of the CBA's Rockford Lightning and Jackson's close friend and literary collaborator. "During a game a few years ago he told me how he faced Satchel Paige in some high-class barnstorming league up around Montana. He got a double off him. But he held out on me."

Rosen said he learned that piece of trivia too late to use in the eclectic 1975 autobiography *Maverick* that he co-wrote with Jackson. The book has become something of an underground item. Rosen claims to have no copies. The publisher, Playboy Press, is out of business. And Jackson almost views the work as an artifact from another time - like love beads.

"I'd just as soon not talk about that book," Jackson, 43, said in an otherwise provocative hour-long conversation last week. "I liked it. It's a unique book. In fact, a basketball coach at the rookie camp in Chicago came up and said he taught English in college and he used the book as one of his examples.

"I've been flattered by the people who liked *Maverick* for what it represented," Jackson said. "As a personal history of myself, I'm not particularly fond of all the things I disclosed. (A failed marriage, fast life in a Manhattan loft and a honest critique of sportswriters for starters.) I guess it was like what the NBA pro life does to all-American type kids who come from the Midwest.

"Maybe I was too open, but I was a very open person at age 29. I was a different type of a player. I was a different type of an individual. So *Maverick* was the term for a person who was unique."

Jackson's academic interests were religion and philosophy, which in everyday living translate into being and reality. In the late '60s he had planned a masters dissertation on a complete personality analysis of every NBA player.

Jackson retreats to Lakeside, Mont., in the summer with his wife and five children to live in a home he designed and constructed. That's where he hikes, trout fishes, reads and reflects. His mother was the captain of her 1927 high school basketball team in Wolf Point, Mont. Jackson's father was a lumberjack who turned to religion after his first wife died in childbirth.

By the time Jackson was born in Deer Lodge, Mont., both his parents were Assembly of God ministers - from the charismatic Pentecostalism that later delivered Jerry Lee Lewis and Jimmy Swaggart.

"Religious influence was very strong when I grew up," Jackson said. "We had very little outside material in our house other than religious material. We had encyclopedias and we got the newspaper. That was it. I could check books out of the library. The rest of it was Biblical stuff and maybe a Newsweek in the mail.

"I wasn't allowed to dance or go to movies. And there was no television in the home."

Jackson has two older brothers, Charles and Joe, and an older sister, Joan. Because of the calling of the church, the Jackson family moved around a great deal. Jackson began playing grade school basketball in Great Falls, Mont. and joined a traveling 4H team in the seventh grade when the family moved to Williston, N.D.

A small but concentrated athletic talent pool explains Jackson's initial gravitation toward baseball. Future major league players such as Oriole-White Sox infielder Jerry Adair and Roy Weatherly of the Cubs played on the semi-pro team in Williston. By the time Jackson was 18, he was coaching a Little League team and when he was 20, he took Williston's Babe Ruth league team to the state championships.

"I was a baseball player first because that's a boy's love and it's a boy's game," Jackson said. "You're not big enough to play basketball correctly. Baseball was fun but it didn't have the intense body contact, competitiveness and the ebb and flow that basketball had for me."

Jackson was divided between baseball and basketball until he spent a summer as a semi-pro pitcher for the Mobridge Lakers in the defunct South Dakota Basin League.

"It wasn't until then - when I lost 15 pounds beating around in those buses in the hot prairie sun, eating bad food and sleeping in short beds - that I decided I better

concentrate on basketball. And I didn't play baseball my senior year in college at North Dakota."

Jackson was a two-time basketball MVP for North Dakota in the North Central Conference. Jerry Krause, the Bulls' vice president of basketball operations, first saw Jackson play at North Dakota.

Jackson's college coach was Bill Fitch, who went on to coach the Boston Celtics, Cleveland Cavaliers and the Houston Rockets. Jackson's intense on-court characteristics and perceptive coaching philosophies began to evolve under Fitch.

Jackson explained, "A lot of young men at that age are willing to sacrifice for the sport. Bill always said there were a few things before basketball - your own beliefs, family and scholastics.

"His emphasis was in the right place. I think he has a real good work ethic about this game. He pushed himself and his team as far as he thought they could go, and held it about at that level for the whole season."

But it was New York Knickerbocker coach Red Holzman who taught Jackson to appreciate defense. Along with Bill Bradley and Walt Frazier, Jackson was part of the sterling 1967-68 Knicks rookie class that meshed with veterans such as Willis Reed and Cazzie Russell.

Jackson played under Holzman from 1967 to 1978. The Knicks were NBA champions in 1970 and 1973. Jackson helped Holzman perfect his risky zone press, which became his defensive trademark.

Jackson, with arms and legs flailing, looked like a Tinker Toy on defense.

"I'd have to say I was a big scorer in college," Jackson said. "I averaged 21 and 27 points my junior and senior years. I was a selfish player who liked to get his points.

"When Red took over the team (from Dick McGuire in the 1967-68 season) he said, 'If you can play defense, you can play for me. If you can't play defense, I can't get you out there. There's only one ball on offense, but all five guys get to play defense.' I paid attention to that. I (developed) the ability to change the pattern of the game when I came in, and I had great success against certain people in this league.

"Any time you have someone on your bench who has the ability to become a stopper defensively, it can throw the game into a different type of activity. (Detroit's) Dennis Rodman stands out like that now."

Jackson, Butch Beard and former Marquette guard Dean "The Dream" Meminger assumed those roles for the Knicks.

In a telephone interview from his Long Island home, Holzman recalled, "Phil was a great defensive player. He had the assets of having the long arms and he was very smart about it. He could play (against) guards, forwards or centers - which he did. And he'd get us some points, too.

"He got in with a great group who were team-minded. We stressed that to everybody and he liked that aspect of it. He thought it was a great way to play basketball. You know, being unselfish sometimes is being selfish, because it is the best way for you to play. Phil fit in best under that system of basketball."

The Knicks were the essence of team basketball to Jackson.

"I played on a unique basketball club," he said. "The Knicks team had all kinds of personalities. From dedicated gymrats to intellectuals. From moneymakers to heartbreakers. I liked to hang out with the guy who wanted to live all of life.

"Bill Bradley was a hero to me growing up in college. He took me to museums and we did things that were unusual. I was able to understand and grow.

"I really had interests in more than a one-dimensional life which was centered around pro basketball. When I went on the road I liked to do other things than go up to the room, turn on the television and watch soap operas. I found it relaxing to go to a museum.

"These were the type of things Bill Bradley opened my eyes to and I was capable of finding my own path later on. In fact, today, I rarely read the sports page. I'm probably one of the few people in this business who doesn't read Sports Illustrated.

"I like the action, the intensity of the game and the thought process of everything that goes into the gamemanship. But I don't want to make it everything in my life."

Former teammate Earl "The Pearl" Monroe remembers Jackson for his deep and diverse convictions and the attention he paid to the game.

"Phil was a little like myself," Monroe said. "He was a late flower child. "As an athlete you're not privvy to say anything about issues, and if anyone wanted to call him a `flake' that would be the reason. He was concerned about the things that were happening around him and he talked about them.

"I wish there were a lot more flakes like Phil Jackson.

"But we always knew he had a tremendous knowledge of the game. He had a chance to sit on the bench, look at things and analyze it. He'd know exactly what to do when he came into the game. That's why I think he'll be a good coach and why he'll relate with young players. . . .

"He understands the roles that guys have to play in the game. It's not the same as if a guy has started, becomes a coach and then doesn't understand roles. Phil understands that.

"People will write about all the other aspects of his personality, but underneath that is the fact he's a very good basketball coach."