

PIONEER

JACKIE ROBINSON'S DAUGHTER REFLECTS ON THE MONUMENTAL ROLE HER FATHER HAD IN BREAKING AMERICA'S COLOR BARRIER



Spider Jorgensen, Pee Wee Reese, Eddie Starkey and Jackie Robinson

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MAGIC MAN

EARVIN JOHNSON JR.'s second act as a philanthropist and a businessman is as remarkable as his NBA career

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Staying Power

HE CAN PROBABLY remember the smell of ice-cold air as it hit his nose first, so bitter that it made his eyes water, then spread painfully to the back of his throat. Then his lungs. At those subzero temperatures, the body works obsessively hard to heat itself. And it's still futile. Regardless of conditioning and notwithstanding how many layers are worn to fend off winter's bite, subzero is subzero, and the air will win every time.

His surroundings were not impressive by any means. Young Earvin Johnson Jr. was just another son of an autoworker father and a custodian mother in Lansing, Mich., about an hour and a half from Detroit. As the seventh of 10 children, young Earvin was a face in a crowd in a shadow of a city. Growing up as he did in Lansing in the 1960s, he watched the economy ebb and flow. He also watched societal tensions heat up, and then boil over on Aug. 7, 1966, when Lansing was consumed in a race riot. Up until then, although Lansing struggled with social equality, it hadn't been nearly as affected as other cities across the country. That all changed on Aug. 7.

From then on, Earvin — and the rest of the city — viewed the idea of community through a much more polarized lens. And from then on, local youths wrestled with the twin problems of staying out of trouble — especially because of those officers in the Lansing Police Department who were not colorblind — while staying occupied.

Staying out of trouble wasn't a problem for Earvin. Being one of the middle children, the task fell on him to help with the youngest children. He was too busy with domestic responsibilities to find trouble. As for staying occupied, there was basketball. It was one of the few sports that didn't cost anything, save for a one-time ball purchase. There were hoops around Lansing on



school playgrounds and in public parks, all within walking distance. Earvin was naturally tall and athletic, which made him a pickup-game commodity: Everyone wanted this lengthy kid on his team. All Earvin wanted to do was play, regardless of whose team he was on and the color of the other players.

Basketball was the grand leveler in Lansing, as it was around the country in the 1960s and '70s. City centers were still melting pots of races and religions. Suburban living was starting to gain momentum, but industrial Midwestern cities like Lansing and Detroit and Cleveland and Indianapolis were examples of coexisting. At the same time, tensions were high, and racially motivated lines of demarcation began to outline these metropolitan areas. Come game time, however, those lines blurred and everyone became a fan. Fans cheer for athletes, and athletes compete to win. Deductively, the winning team wins the fans. And young Earvin most certainly had a penchant for winning. After all, with a monkish training regimen — one doesn't know how bad winter's bite



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Magic Johnson on the Lansing race riots of 1966

"The race riots of Lansing had both a lasting impact on me and it played a huge part in my commitment to empower and uplift the underserved communities. It was a very difficult situation; everybody was on edge. During that time I got bused to a school across town, which forced me to develop relationships and learn how to deal with people that were not African-American. That experience made me a better person and ultimately the man I am today. Being bused introduced me to a different environment. I saw different things in my new school's neighborhood than I did in my own neighborhood. I was exposed to both worlds and basically that's where the seed was planted in my head, without me even knowing that I wanted to bring quality retailers to urban America. And look at me now [laughs]."

hurts the lungs until one practices his jump shot in Lansing in late January — and a knack for competition, Earvin was bound to be good. But no one could have predicted how good. And no one could have foreseen how profound an impact he'd have on global society, let alone on the game of basketball.

He was only 15 when a local newspaper writer dubbed the sophomore

standout from Everett High School "Magic." The name was catchy.

In 1977, a now 18-year-old student athlete known around the East Lansing campus of Michigan State University as Magic Johnson was making national headlines because of his basketball prowess. He knew his collegiate impact on the game was being felt. And feared, especially down in Kentucky and North Carolina, and over in Wisconsin, where the other basketball powerhouses tried to develop a strategy for neutralizing Magic's play lest they should meet in the NCAA tournament. There was probably a tiny pang of fear stabbing the gut of a guy over at Indiana State University named Larry Bird as well.

The more Magic played, the more Michigan State won. The more stories were written, the more fans flocked to catch an MSU game, either on the road or in East Lansing. Yet in all the media hoopla and grandiose projections of inevitable NBA stardom for Magic Johnson, one measurable contribution to American society was being overlooked: Magic Johnson and his contemporaries were uniting the nation. The game of basketball was so universally embraced and team passions ran so universally deep that ethnicity and socioeconomic status meant nothing to the fan. Whenever Magic played, the man in the mansion from Grosse Pointe sat in the same stands as the custodian from Lansing. Basketball was so thoroughly integrated as well that organized leagues were institutional bellwethers. The argument that basketball could be the tie that binds was no longer theoretical. Magic helped make it empirical. All these years later, with Magic Johnson a household name as well as an international brand (page 50), the voices of history are louder than ever.


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