

## \*The Short, Starcrossed Career of Magic Abdul-Jordan\*

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Nobody knew his real name (began Big Red), but that didn't matter, because by the time he was ten years old they'd already renamed him Magic Abdul-Jordan, after three of the greatest ancient basketball players. There wasn't a shot he couldn't make, and oh, how that boy could jump! He was quicker than a Denebian weaselcat, and nobody ever worked harder at perfecting his game.

When he was twelve, he stood seven feet tall, and his folks moved to the Delphini system, where they still played basketball for big money. Hired him a private tutor, and let him turn pro when he was thirteen.

First I ever heard of him was when word reached us out on the Rim about this fifteen-year-old phenom who stood more than eight feet tall and could reach almost twice his height at the top of his jump. A year or two later his team ran out of competition and went barnstorming through the Outer Frontier, and wherever Magic Abdul-Jordan went, he filled the stadiums. I don't think that young man ever saw an empty seat in any arena he ever played.

Nobody knew why, but the kid just kept on growing and forgot to stop. By the time he was seventeen, he was nine feet tall, and they changed the rules to try to make things a little fairer. The baskets were raised to a height of fifteen feet, and he was only allowed two of those spectacular dunks of his per half; anything more than that was a technical foul.

But none of that bothered him. He kept honing his skills and working on his moves. I finally got to play against him on Ragitura II, when he had just turned twenty. By then no closed arena could accommodate the crowds that wanted to see him, and he played all his games in outdoor stadiums. I think maybe two hundred thousand Men and about half that many aliens showed up to see him that day.

When he came out onto the court I couldn't believe my eyes. He was close to twelve feet tall, but he had the grace of a dancer. Don't tell me about the square-cube law. I was there; I saw him. This kid could have stuffed the ball if they'd hung the basket twenty feet above the floor, and he was so quick he led his team down the floor on every fast break.

I was the best player on our team, so I got the dubious honor of guarding him. The rule changes had allowed each of his opponents ten fouls. I ran through all ten of mine in something like six minutes, at which time he'd already put 37 points on the board. When the game was over, I did something I've never done before or since: I walked up to an opponent and asked for an autograph.

He seemed like a nice, modest young man, and everyone predicted a great future for him. I made up my mind to keep an eye on him as his career developed, but that was the only time I ever saw him.

Next I heard of him was a little over a year later. He was up to fourteen feet tall, and it was getting hard to find anyone to play against him. They kept changing the rules, and he kept growing past all the changes. Pretty soon they had the basket so high that he couldn't dunk anymore -- but none of the other players could even throw the ball that high.

Another year passed, and he was eighteen feet tall and still growing. They had to construct a special ship to accommodate him, but then one team after another canceled their games. They gave all kinds of reasons, but the simple fact was that no one was willing to play against him any more. He was just too big and too good, and finally, faced with imminent bankruptcy, the team had to cancel his contract.

That was the last anyone ever saw or heard of the poor bastard. Every now and then I'll hear about a real tall, middle-aged phenom playing in some pick-up league, and I'll fly halfway across the galaxy to see

if it's him, but invariably it's some guy who's seven feet tall and starting to go a little bald.

Anyway, that's why you never saw him or heard of him. But trust me -- no one who ever had the privilege of watching Magic Abdul-Jordan in action will ever forget him. He's probably out there somewhere, towering above his world like an attenuated mountain, still working on his moves, hoping and praying that they'll ask him to come back for one last game so he can give a new generation of fans one final thrill.

But of course they never will.

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His story finished, Big Red pulled a white handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose noisily.

"This guy really existed?" said Three-Gun Max.

"I just told you so, didn't I?"

"I thought maybe you made it up. I mean, hell, true or false it makes a good story."

"It is a good story," agreed Big Red. "But if I'd made it up, I'd have held him to three points and picked up only one foul in 40 minutes."

"A telling point," agreed Catastrophe Baker. "That's sure the way I'd have made it up."

"Well, I guess he was the most famous athlete that no one ever heard of," agreed Max.

"Yeah," said Big Red, "I had the privilege of playing against the greatest unknown jockstrapper in the galaxy, and the greatest known one, too."

"You played against McPherson?" said Max dubiously.

"You ever hear of a greater known one?" was Big Red's answer.

"Boy, I remember flying all the way to the Pilaster system to see him!" said Nicodemus Mayflower with a nostalgic smile on his face.

"Even I heard of him," chimed in Catastrophe Baker, "and I've been too busy with Pirate Queens and Temple Virgins and the like to pay much attention to children's games." He paused. "Old Iron-Arm. They say he was something else." He turned to Big Red. "Whatever became of him, anyway?"

"Well, that's really Einstein's story to tell," answered Big Red. "But since he can't communicate in any language that isn't full of numbers and strange symbols, I suppose I'd better tell it for him."

And so he did.