

FRED BOWEN SERIES
SPORTS STORY

THE FINAL CUT

FRED BOWEN





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Summary: After tryouts for the school basketball team, eighth graders Zeke, Eli, Ryan, and Miles find their friendship tested when two of them make the team and two of them do not. Includes facts about Michael Jordan and Bill Russell.

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ONE

Ryan Phillips looked around the small huddle of boys standing on the windswept field. It was late afternoon on a crisp autumn day. “First down,” he said. “What should we do?”

Eli Powell, the biggest kid in the group, shrugged his shoulders and didn’t say anything. Miles DuBow shook his head and said, “I don’t know. I just don’t want to be the hiker again.”

Edward “Zeke” Zilkowski stepped into the middle of the huddle and took charge. “Okay,” he said. He used his finger to trace a football pattern on the front of Ryan’s sweatshirt. “Ryan, you’re going to go down about five steps, fake out to the sidelines,

and go long.” Ryan studied Zeke’s finger as it moved up his sweatshirt and nodded. He glanced over his shoulder. The four boys on the other team were waiting impatiently on the other side of the football. Ryan turned his attention back to the huddle.

Zeke looked up at Eli. “Eli, you go down about seven steps and cut across the middle—” he started.

“What about me?” Miles interrupted, punching Zeke on the shoulder.

“Miles, you hike and stay in to block.”

“Again?” Miles protested. “I’ve hiked way more than Ryan and Eli put together.”

“Come on, you’re our best hiker,” Ryan pleaded.

“But there’s nothing to hiking,” Miles complained.

“That’s why you’re so good at it,” Zeke said, patting Miles on the back.

“I don’t see why we’re even playing football,” Miles muttered. “We should be practicing basketball.”

“We’ve got plenty of time to play hoop,” Ryan said. “Come on. Let’s play football.”

The four boys lined up. Ryan looked across the scrimmage line and eyed his opponent, Dustin Henry. Zeke meanwhile kept his eyes on Dustin's teammate Nathan Harmata.

"Remember, you can't rush in before you count 'three Mississippi,'" Zeke called to Nathan, who was clearly ready to pounce on Zeke.

"Just hike the ball," Nathan replied, locking eyes with Zeke.

Zeke barked out the signals: "Ready, set, hut one...hut two...hut three."

Ryan broke into a run, and Nathan started counting. "One Mississippi...two...."

On his fifth step, Ryan broke to his right, glanced back at Zeke, and then suddenly changed directions and started sprinting upfield.

"Three Mississippi!" Nathan yelled.

Zeke lofted a long pass toward Ryan, sending the football sailing into the clear October sky. Ryan dashed after it. As the ball started to fall ahead of him, he took a flying leap and stretched out his arms as

far as he could. He felt the ball brush against his fingertips, then his body slammed against the dirt. When he looked up, the ball was bouncing awkwardly away. "Incomplete!" Dustin shouted.

Ryan clutched his aching side as he got to his feet.

"Good try," Dustin said as he helped Ryan up. "You had me beat."

Ryan trotted slowly back to the huddle.

"Sorry," Zeke said. "I threw that one a little too long."

"I should have had it," Ryan said, still holding his side.

"You'd better hike it this time," Zeke said to Ryan. Then he turned to Eli and Miles. "Eli, you go down and do a buttonhook. I'll throw it high. Miles, you go down and out."

"Finally," Miles said.

This time Zeke whistled a hard pass right to Eli, who grabbed the ball but was tagged before he could move an inch.

"Good catch, big guy," Ryan said, clapping his hands.

"Third down!" Dustin called. "You guys have two more downs left."

“Tie game, right?” Zeke asked as the teams moved up the field. “Next touchdown wins.”

“Yeah,” replied the boys on the other team as Ryan and his friends huddled again.

“I can beat Dustin on a long pass,” Ryan whispered to Zeke.

“Okay,” Zeke said. “You run a long slant from the right side.” Then, pointing to Eli, Zeke said, “Eli, you cut across the middle from the left side in case Ryan doesn’t get open.”

Eli nodded.

“I guess I’m hiking again,” Miles said, sounding annoyed.

“You’re the best, Miles.” Zeke smiled. “What can I say?”

Ryan lined up on the right side. He kept his feet straight and stared directly at Dustin. He was careful not to let his face or his position give Dustin any clues about the pattern.

“Ready, set, hut one...hut two...”

Miles hiked the ball back straight and true.

“One Mississippi...two Mississippi....

Ryan ran straight for Dustin, who quickly braced himself for a collision. But at the last instant, Ryan angled to the middle of the field without breaking stride.

“Three Mississippi!”

Zeke let go a long pass, and Ryan took off after the speeding football. His legs were churning and his heart was pumping. He got to the ball in time, reached up, and grabbed it, but it popped out of his hands and tumbled end over end in the air. Ryan didn't miss a step. He stayed with it and the ball fell, spinning, right into his cradled arms. He raced into the end zone and raised the football high in triumph.

Zeke, Eli, and Miles raced down the field, celebrating and shouting as they ran.

“Touchdown!”

“Great catch, Ryan!”

“Great throw, Zeke.”

Smiling, Zeke turned to the other team. “You want to play another game?” he asked.

“No,” Dustin answered, shaking his head. “We've gotta get going.”

The other team left and soon it was just the four friends in the middle of the big field, their shadows growing longer as the sun set.

“You want to play a game with just the four of us?” Zeke asked, twirling the football into the air.

“I’m tired,” Miles said, shaking his head. “And anyway, I have to practice my sax.” He walked over to the side of the field and picked up his saxophone case.

“We’ve played enough football,” Ryan said. “Miles was right. We’ve really got to start concentrating on basketball. Intramurals start in a couple of days, and tryouts for the school basketball team are in a month and a half.”

“Intramurals! That’s just a big word for flunky teams,” Zeke said. “You don’t even have to try out for intramurals. The gym teachers just put you on a team and you play against other kids in the school. All I care about is making the real school team—the Sligo Stallions. I want to play against the best kids from other schools.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Ryan argued. “If we want to make the Stallions, we should start practicing now and plan on playing intramurals. That would give us a head start.”

“Come on,” Zeke pleaded, looking up at the cloudless sky. “It’s football weather.”

“I got it,” Ryan decided. “Let’s go to my house and hang out in the basement. We can play Ping-Pong and Miles can practice his sax.”

“Let’s play football while we’ve still got a little light left in the day,” Zeke said.

Eli eyed Zeke. “I bet I can beat you at Ping-Pong,” he said.

“You’re on,” Zeke said.

MICHAEL JORDAN

THE REAL STORY

Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bulls and the Washington Wizards was without a doubt one of the greatest basketball players of all time.

Michael played on many championship teams—at the University of North Carolina, in the National Basketball Association (NBA), and in the Olympics. He was a ten-time NBA All-Star and a ten-time NBA scoring champ. And Michael was not only a big star in America; he has fans all over the world.

But he wasn't born big and famous. As a kid in Wilmington, North Carolina, Michael Jordan was just one of the crowd. He wasn't the best basketball player in the neighborhood, or even the best basketball player in

his family. His older brother Larry always beat him in one-on-one games. Michael learned a lot from him.

Basketball was just one of the sports Michael played as a kid. He was a pitcher on his school's baseball team and a quarterback on the football team.



Michael Jordan flies high over Hogard High School defenders for the Lancey High School uccaneers in 1980.

But in high school, Michael really started to get serious about basketball. By the time he was a sophomore, Michael had grown to 5 feet, 10 inches tall and played point guard. Though he thought he was good enough for the school's varsity basketball team, he didn't make the final cut, and he spent the whole season playing with

the junior varsity. His disappointment at not making varsity made him more determined

to make it next time. The following summer he played basketball every chance he got. He worked hard on improving his skills. (He also grew five inches!)

When he started his junior year, Michael was bigger and better, and he had no trouble making the varsity team. But he didn't slow down after he made the team. He kept working hard. He went to his varsity practices, but he also kept going to junior varsity practices so he could get extra workout time. And by his senior year, Michael was an outstanding ballplayer.

Michael Jordan is not the only basketball star who struggled at the beginning. Boston Celtic center Bill Russell did, too. He is retired now, but when Bill Russell played, he was basketball's greatest winner. In college, he played on teams that won two championships, and in the pros, his teams won eleven NBA championships. Russell also played basketball in the Olympics, where his team won the gold medal.

Russell grew up in Oakland, California. As a kid, he was tall and clumsy. "I could

run and jump, all right, but if there was a basketball within twenty feet of me, I went to pieces,” he once said.



Bill Russell prepares to sink a shot for the University of San Francisco Dons in the mid-1950s.

When he was a sophomore in high school, he tried out for the junior varsity basketball team. (He knew he didn't have a chance of making the varsity.) Sixteen kids tried out for fifteen spots. The team's kind coach, George Powles, did not have the heart to cut anyone. So Bill and a teammate had to share the fifteenth jersey. Though today Bill Russell is in the Basketball Hall of Fame, during his sophomore year in high school, he only played in half of the junior varsity games—he sat in street clothes behind the team's bench during the other games!

Like Michael Jordan, young Bill Russell kept practicing and kept growing. After his senior year in high school, he earned a basketball scholarship to the University of San Francisco and was on his way to becoming a basketball star.

Michael Jordan and Bill Russell got better because they didn't give up. They both kept playing and worked hard. And they learned that even if a player doesn't make the final cut one year, with hard work and dedication, that player may very well make the team next time.