

# Michael Jordan gets acquainted with Charlotte

By Scott Fowler  
sfowler@charlotteobserver.com  
Posted: Sunday, Jul. 11, 2010

Michael Jordan sightings in Charlotte used to be rare enough that they had a Halley's Comet quality.

Look over there. Did you see that bald head? Was that him?

Maybe it was. Hard to tell, because inevitably a door was closing somewhere, and you weren't invited inside.

Not anymore. In the three months or so since Jordan bought the Charlotte Bobcats from Bob Johnson and became the team's majority owner, Jordan's visibility both in the community and in the Bobcats' offices has increased dramatically.

Jordan has bought a home in uptown Charlotte five minutes from Time Warner Cable Arena and plans to start living there part time in September. He has found several places he likes to hang out in Charlotte - bowling at Strike City in the EpiCentre, schmoozing at Mez restaurant, eating New York-style pizza and watching sports on TV at Selwyn Pub.

"I'm starting to understand my surroundings," Jordan told me in an interview Friday. "I'm moving around. I'm finding out where I like to go in Charlotte to eat and to relax. I want to be part of the community and to interact with the public."

In the Bobcats' headquarters, the tale is similar. Jordan has owned a piece of the Bobcats since 2006 and has managed the basketball operations since then, but he was rarely in the office until recently. He conducted most of his business by phone. There were always whispers from Bobcats types that if you wanted to find MJ, you'd best look on the golf course.

Jordan hasn't given up golf, but occasionally he has started Bobcats ticket-sales meetings at 7:30 a.m. The four top Bobcats ticket salesmen each month eat lunch with Jordan in his office. They order in food and talk for an hour.

"One of the things I wanted to do is be able to bond with the people who are working for me," Jordan said. "I didn't want them to be intimidated by me. I wanted them to see me and call me 'MJ.' I want them to know I'm a real person. I'm not just a figurehead. I think in the past sometimes they didn't know who they worked for - maybe they never had the chance to meet Bob. I don't want that to happen with me."

With Jordan's blessing, the 40-person ticket-sales staff worked for months on a goal of selling 1,250 new Bobcats season tickets by July 1.

If they made it, they would get to go on an all-expense-paid trip to Las Vegas this August funded by the Bobcats, and most likely held in conjunction with Jordan's fantasy basketball camp.

They just surpassed that goal, so they're going.

With Jordan now owning about 80 percent of the team - at a personal cost of around \$220 million - he is no longer just the Bobcats' basketball boss.

Jordan is the boss of the whole franchise. And he's been far more committed to the cause than he was when he was a minority owner and the unpopular Johnson served as majority owner. It's mostly Jordan's money at stake now, and the ultracompetitive Jordan has never liked losing money at anything.

'Glad you made it back'

This week in Charlotte, Jordan hosted two fantasy basketball camps for some of the Bobcats' season-ticket holders - one for adults and one for kids.

It was interesting to watch both groups interact with him. The adults treated Jordan like a demigod, listening to every word with rapt attention. Jordan, 47, was the best basketball player of their generation, and they all remember him vividly from his NBA playing days.

"We want to say thanks for re-upping with us," Jordan told the adults Thursday night, speaking from the free-throw line as they gathered in a semicircle around the three-point line. "Thanks for coming back and being a part of what we're trying to do here."

The kids? They came Friday morning, and you could tell they mostly wanted Jordan to be quiet so they could go play.

Jordan interacted easily with both groups. He has long been able to turn on the charm when he wants. He's a natural storyteller and changes the feel of any room he walks into.

But Jordan - who grew up in Wilmington and graduated from UNC Chapel Hill - has long been so famous that opportunities for the general public to see him have been rare. He still lives much of his life in a world inside private planes (his is painted Carolina blue) and velvet ropes.

You'd never do that, right, if you were that famous? You might change your mind if you were around Jordan for a while. It will vicariously wear you out. One person after another wants to talk to him, to get an autograph or picture, to grab just five minutes and five minutes more.

The fantasy camp - this past week's was the second annual - was Jordan's idea. It's an added value for the Bobcats' most loyal fans, and the team is always looking for more of those.

Even with the latest season-ticket sales, the Bobcats will probably end up with about 7,800 season tickets in a 19,000-seat arena for the 2010-11 season, Bobcats President Fred Whitfield said. They want to reach 10,000-12,000 season tickets in the next few years.

The numbers are trending upward, however. Corporate sponsorships are up - Whitfield said they have added 30 new ones and will have about 90 this season. Jordan has made himself available to help close corporate deals, Whitfield said, and "put us over the top."

Early in Jordan's four-year tenure with the Bobcats, long before he bought the team, he said Bobcats fans shouldn't expect to see him washing his car in the driveway. And they still won't see that, although they might see him driving either his yellow Ferrari or gray Lamborghini.

But after peeking out of his shell several times, he has liked what he has seen here. Naturally gregarious, he has started coming out more often.

"I've been treated with respect in Charlotte," Jordan said. "My privacy isn't infringed upon too much. Obviously people are sometimes amazed to see you moving around. I hear a lot of 'Glad you made it back home,' 'Good that you're on the team,' and 'We know we're going to turn things around.' That's a sign we're moving in the right direction."

'Having your own place'

At Mez in the EpiCentre - where Jordan sometimes goes to watch sports and socialize - manager Jason Gilbert said hosting Jordan isn't as hard as you might think.

"He's great," Gilbert said. "It's pretty low-key when he comes in, really. Nobody bothers him too much."

Jordan also has been literally more visible at Bobcats games. He used to sit in an upper-level suite, invisible to the general public. But he has owned the two seats next to the Bobcats' bench for a couple of years now - he pays for the seats, too. And he has bought two more for the 2010-11 season, meaning he now owns the four seats nearest the bench.

"If only everyone would double their season-ticket order like Michael did," Whitfield said with a laugh.

Jordan still has no plans to live here full time. He has long maintained his primary residence in the Chicago area, and he's also building a home in south Florida.

But he will be glad to leave the uptown hotel where he has stayed for days and weeks at a time over the past several months.

"Hotel life is starting to get a little tiresome," Jordan said. "I need to start planting some roots. I need a place where I can bring a bunch of my clothes. There's nothing like having your own place to relax."

The Bobcats have kept Jordan busy as the face of the franchise. He was the honorary starter for the NASCAR All-Star race in May. He played golf once again in the Quail Hollow Championship's pro-am. He plans to host some of the Bobcats' sponsors for Carolina Panthers games in the suite he co-owns with Johnson. (The two remain friends, and Johnson still owns a small piece of the team.)

Jordan said the Bobcats still have a lot to do in the area of community relations, where he believes the franchise was badly damaged during Johnson's tenure. He has hired former Charlotte Hornets executive Carl Scheer to help rebuild the Bobcats' reputation.

Jordan also wants to get more involved in charitable work here. There are "100 good causes" trying to get Jordan on-board, Whitfield said, and Jordan will choose some of them soon.

In the meantime, Jordan is mostly trying to shake a lot of hands and immerse himself in Charlotte. "I'm starting to feel," Jordan said, "like I'm back home."