

Sneaker Century: A History of Athletic Shoes

By Amber J. Keyser

Preston Truman's mom had tried to clean the red-and-black basketball shoes, but he rescued them. These scuffed size thirteens with the autograph scrawled across one toe were something special—a piece of history. They didn't smell like sweat or the waxy polish of a basketball court. These sneakers smelled like victory. And Truman wasn't the only one who thought so.

In 2013 Truman pulled the shoes out of the safe-deposit box at a local bank where he had stored them for sixteen years. He contacted Grey Flannel Auctions, an auction house that specializes in sports memorabilia, and the bidding began. In the end, an anonymous collector bought them for \$104,765.

That's a lot of money for a pair of sneakers, but those Nike Air Jordans weren't just any shoes. They were superstar basketball player Michael Jordan's famous flu shoes.

When Truman first met Jordan, it was 1996, and Truman was a teenage ball boy at the Delta Center Arena in Salt Lake City, Utah. Jordan, the star player for the Chicago Bulls, was suiting up for a regular season basketball game against the Utah Jazz, and he wasn't happy. The man wanted graham crackers and applesauce, but the sauce had gone AWOL. Jordan turned to Truman and teased, "There will be no autographs for ball boys after the game if I don't get my applesauce."

Truman was off like a shot, casing the sports facility for the goods, finally hitting pay dirt in a food storage room. Jordan got his snack, and Truman had made a friend.

Seven months later, the Bulls were back in Utah for the 1997 National Basketball Association (NBA) Finals. Again, Truman was working in the visiting team's locker room. This time, he had graham crackers and applesauce ready and waiting for Jordan, who remembered the teenager from before.

After the fourth game in the series, the Jazz had won two games and the Bulls had won two games. Game 5 would be pivotal. The winner would need just one more victory to clinch the best-of-seven series. However, Jordan had the flu and was so sick he could barely walk, much less play ball. His medical team told him to stay in bed, but instead, Jordan dragged himself to the locker room. Three hours before game time, Jordan was in a darkened back room, eyes closed, hooked up to an IV for fluids, visualizing what he had to do to win the game.

Finally, Jordan decided he could play—barely.

He slumped on the bench. He stumbled on and off the court. He could hardly run, and he nearly passed out. At times his teammates literally held him up. Team doctors told him he needed to stay out of the game, but the Jazz were ahead and Jordan didn't like to lose.

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