

How to beat the Detroit Pistons.

Even if you're not a basketball fan (or a training shoe fan for that matter) you've probably heard of Michael Jordan. A member of the six times NBA championship winning Chicago Bulls team in the nineties and holder of the MVP (most valuable player award) five times, a feat only beaten by Kareem Abdul Jabarr in the 1970's.

Michael Jordan joined the Chicago Bulls in the mid-eighties as part of a team rebuild. The management wanted to start winning championships and so brought in players like Jordan, Scottie Pippen and Horace Grant as a formidable strike force. And strike they did as they begin to win games and it looked like they were going to win their first championship.

But then came the Detroit Pistons.

The thin line between a sense of Focus and creating a Silo.

In some respects Michael Jordan could be seen as either the greatest team player or the worst. In practices before games he would push the other players to play better, make more baskets and insult them if they couldn't live up to his expectations. Maybe this worked, maybe not, as the Bulls started to win with the new line up. If all five members of the team were playing well then they were virtually unstoppable. And if they were not playing well, then Jordan would take it on himself to win. Driving toward the basket for lay ups or making three pointers whenever he took possession of the ball.

This was how the legend of Michael Jordan began, and almost ended. Because there was one team that didn't like being beaten by a one man band.

You've guessed it. Those Pistons from Detroit.

Inspection and Adaptation used for evil.

Chuck Daley, the head coach of the Detroit Pistons was tired of being beaten by the Bulls and more accurately by a single determined player. The Pistons defensive players already had a reputation for playing a hard game, fouling sometimes just to dominate rather for any strategic reason. They were known as 'The Bad Boys' and with the acquisition of a certain loose cannon named Dennis Rodman that reputation was concreted with a fresh batch of elbowed faces and pulled shirts.

Daley's new tactic for dealing with the Chicago Bulls was called "Jordan Rules." Its basic tenet was this. If Michael gets the ball, mob him. Block him, foul him, and bully him. Anything to stop him from scoring.

And it worked. The Pistons won the next two championships.

Openness, Commitment, Inspection and Adaptation used for good

Phil Jackson was the new coach of the Chicago Bulls at the end of the nineteen eighties. He had watched the manner in which the Pistons had dominated his team and had to explain to the simple fact to the Bulls players.

The way they were playing wasn't working. Michael Jordan in particular had to realise that he could not win games alone by determination alone, no matter how admirable that was. So what could they do?

Phil Jackson created a way of playing called the triangle offense. This was based on another system developed in the 1950's and adapted it for the modern game. The basis of this way of playing was to always have a triangle of players moving around near the basket. This stretched the defence and if a member of the triangle was in a scoring position then he could be passed to. If not there were still two other members of the team on the wings that could be utilised to attempt three point (long) shots.

But Phil had been in the game long enough to realise that such a tactic wasn't a quick fix. He had adapted it from another method and knew that it would have to be tested in games. Tested, analysed and changed until it consistently worked.

He explained to the team that this was not a magic wand and could take anything up to a year to implement.

And the team said yes.

Courage and Respect (and a little bit of a lack of)

In the 1991-1992 NBA playoff championships the Chicago Bulls met the Detroit Pistons. And this time Chuck Daly's Jordan Rules just didn't apply. Even when the triangle of Scottie Pippen, MJ and Horace Grant were making baskets and the Pistons defence closed them down, the ball would be switched out to John Paxman or BJ Cartwright. Normally defensive players, they were trusted to make the long shots when they needed to.

And they did. The playoffs are the best of seven games. Chicago won all four in a row. The Pistons left the court eight seconds from the end, refusing to shake the Bulls player's hands. Chuck Daley resigned at the end of the season.

Team work and the ultimate in T shaped people.

The Bulls won the championship that year and for the next two years. Ironically Dennis Rodman joined them from the Pistons after Daley's departure making the Bulls defence even stronger.

Michael Jordan took a brief sojourn into Baseball in 1994, playing for a professional team mostly as a reaction to the death of his father. The Bulls also lost that year but this could also be attributed to injury problems and various player disputes.

MJ returned in 1995 and the Bulls won the championship another three times in a row, before the team, management deciding that they had reached their limits were disbanded.

But whilst story of the legendary period for the Chicago Bulls ends in 1998, it can still teach us much about how much can be achieved when a team is open new ideas and has the willingness to try them.

“The Last Dance” the story of Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls is currently on Netflix.