



BARKLEY

A BIOGRAPHY

TIMOTHY BELLA

"[Charles Barkley's] larger-than-life persona shines through in Timothy Bella's writing and I know this biography of one of the world's most entertaining people will be enjoyed by many."

—SHAQUILLE O'NEAL

season before. Dumas's suspension had caused the Detroit Pistons to back out of a trade that would have sent Dennis Rodman to Phoenix to pair with Charles. Colangelo recommended Dumas apologize to the city of Phoenix before he could be reinstated.

Perhaps no one was more supportive of Dumas upon his return than Charles, telling him at a team meeting, "There's nothing I won't do for you." The meeting followed an afternoon practice, sessions that featured post-workout beers—and Charles loved his beer after practice. Sure enough, Colangelo responded to Charles's words with praise and a suggestion.

"Jerry goes, 'Charles, I think that's great, and I think if you're saying you would do anything, we should take beer out of the locker room,'" Kleine recalled. "And out of this hard and long 'I'll do anything for you' talk, Charles goes, 'Well, I don't see why *that* is going to be important. If the guy is going to drink, he's going to drink.' In a manner of thirty seconds, he went from one end of the spectrum to the other."

Though Charles looked more like his dominant self, the wear and tear was getting to him, and he would miss fourteen games, including the first eleven of the season for an abdominal strain. And more time addressing his sore bones in the hot tub and with acupuncture meant Charles would inevitably need something from "Chumpy."

Jae Staats waited to hear those words: *Chumpy, come here*. Growing up in Nebraska, Staats fell hard for the Suns upon moving to Phoenix.

Living close by the old coliseum, he was a regular ball boy for home games until he was promoted to bench boy, which involved folding jerseys, handing the players towels, and catering to them in the locker room. He'd read Bible verses with Johnson and take Green on an emergency trip to the dentist, before picking him up some movies at Blockbuster. When Shaquille O'Neal was in town one time, Shaq Diesel asked Staats to go get the number of a woman sitting in the stands.

Staats soon became a trusted assistant of sorts to Charles, even if Chuck refused to call the eighteen-year-old by his real name. "Maureen nudged him once and went, 'Charles, his name is Jae.' He goes, 'Well, Chumpy is better than little fucker or little shit,'" Staats said. "It was his term of endearment for me. Boy, I got used to it."

There was the time on New Year's Eve when Staats, in the middle of taping some obscure college game for the scouts, was approached by Charles for a personal ask: he needed him to shave his head. As Staats sat in front of a mirror and carefully took a razor to a head covered in shaving cream, Charles asked him about his grandparents, how he was doing in school, whether he had a girlfriend and, most importantly, if he wanted to go to his New Year's party.

After forgetting his shoes, Charles sent Chumpy to his home in Paradise Valley to retrieve them, leading Staats to see fifty pairs of Nikes stacked neatly in the corner of what he concluded was "the cleanest garage I've ever seen." But the real treat came from driving Charles's

cars to get them filled up, specifically the \$120,000 Mercedes-Benz convertible. Staats, who had never been in an accident, was instructed that the key and some money were in Charles's shoe before he was left with some parting words.

"He said, 'Chumpy, if you wreck it, I'll kill you,'" Staats remembered. "His tips helped me pay for my college."

The message the Suns sent to the league in their 59-win season was one of redemption. Finishing sixth in MVP voting with 23 points and 11 rebounds a game, Charles's third season with Phoenix marked the first time in franchise history that the team had at least fifty-five games in three consecutive seasons. The second-seed Suns put everyone on notice, starting with Portland. Even with Majerle's poor shooting and Johnson playing on a sore left hamstring, the Suns made easy work of the Trail Blazers, sweeping them behind a 47-point showing from Charles, who was booed every time he touched the ball in the deciding game.

Winners of eleven of their last twelve, the team was clowning on their opponents to the point that they had to open a company just to keep up with the supply and demand.

"What business are we in?" Charles asked Majerle before the start of round two.

"The butt-kicking business," he replied.

"And how's business?"

"Business is good!"

In the Houston visitors' locker room, Charles grabbed a piece of chalk and headed to the blackboard. Up 3-1, the Suns were now a game away from exorcising their red-and-yellow demons. Buttkicking Inc. was booming, but they hadn't buried the Rockets just yet. He scrawled across the board:

THEY WANT TO DIE. YOU HAVE TO KILL 'EM.

Houston's title defense that year had been inconsistent and flat. Despite a Valentine's Day trade to reunite Clyde Drexler with Phi Slama Jama frat brother Olajuwon, the Rockets were unable to rise above the sixth seed in a loaded Western Conference. Whatever momentum Houston had from a five-game upset of the Utah Jazz in the first round had evaporated against the Suns. Charles and Johnson averaged nearly 60 points in their wins. "They were so damn good," said Rockets coach Rudy Tomjanovich.

Phoenix was doing this despite Olajuwon dropping almost 30 points a game against them to that point. The Rockets cried conspiracy for the one-sided officiating and the league scheduling games on back-to-back days. Elyse Lanier, the Houston mayor's wife, called the league office to complain after Drexler was ejected during the first quarter of Game 1.

Franchise Senior and Franchise Junior, the names used by Charles for him and KJ, took advantage of defensive weak spots for a

what's up.'"

On August 18, 1996, that the Suns traded Charles and a future second-round pick to the Rockets in exchange for Robert Horry, Sam Cassell, Brown, and backup big man Mark Bryant.

Charles called the shots and got his way again, saying he had to "stand up to the system" even if it meant a public relations disaster.

Charles landed in Houston that night and was whisked away by security to a limo on the tarmac.

In a sendoff note to the fans printed in the *Republic*, Charles thanked everyone from the police who protected him and the restaurant owners who fed him to Hispanic people and "the little old ladies." Yet there was a sense of sadness in leaving a place that had come to define him, knowing the void of a title and public fallout with Colangelo would follow him.

"People always remember the last thing that happened. I can't do that, because I will get depressed," he wrote. "So I choose to remember those first three years and say, 'Wow, what great years!'"

In the days following the deal, Jae Staats received a voice mail on his cell phone. The bench boy recognized the number, but paused when he realized he wasn't being summoned to pick up shoes or get his car detailed. Charles was calling to thank Jae. A quarter of a century later, Staats still has the twenty-second message saved.

This message is for Jae. Jae, this is Charles Barkley. I just called to check on you. I'm callin' all you boys, make sure y'all staying out of trouble and

doing the right thing. I just called basically to say hello. I'll call you back at another time. Take care of yourself and stay out of trouble. Later.

Fresh off losing all of his basketball talent in *Space Jam* to an alien named Pound, Charles turned to God for answers on the whereabouts of his powers. Kneeling in the church, the desperate star made promises to the Big Man that ranged from unlikely to unreasonable: *No more swearing. No more technicals. No more dates with Madonna.*

Charles joked that the Michael Jordan–Bugs Bunny team-up in 1996 was "arguably the greatest sports movie ever." But Barkley's own acting in *Space Jam* was also not up to snuff for fellow thespian Shaquille O'Neal, most notably of *Kazaam* fame.

"And I thought *Kazaam* was bad. That was terrible. That was worse than *Kazaam*," O'Neal told Charles to his face. "That was awful!"

Just as Charles lost his skills in *Space Jam* so too did he now worry about meeting the same fate in Houston.

The expectations were made clear in a poster featuring their new Big Three of Charles, Hakeem Olajuwon, and Clyde Drexler standing around the two Larry O'Brien trophies from '94 and '95: Title or bust.

Yet Charles's window in Houston was limited at best. The Rockets had mortgaged their future for a chance to have three future Hall of Famers between the ages of thirty-four and thirty-five make one more run at a title, hopefully challenging Chicago's championship 3-peat.