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THE DOCTOR

Erving Is Making Final House Calls

By Ron Thomas

It was 1976, the summer of the ABA-NBA merger, and Julius Erving was being showcased in NBA cities for the first time. The ABA hadn't had a major television contract and was more of a rumor than a memory for most of the nation. But anyone who called himself a basketball fan had heard about "The Doctor."

Such was his legend that 6000 fans packed DePaul University's Alumni Hall in Chicago to see this phenomenon from basketball outer space. They saw Mickey Johnson, then with the Chicago Bulls, set himself in the lane to take a charge from The Doctor, then lean back with his face toward the ceiling as Erving leaped over his head for a stuff.

With about two minutes left to play, Erving left the game accompanied by a standing ovation. The game continued, but the fans began streaming out of the arena.

"Doc be gone: I be gone," one fan said.

After tonight, Doc will "be gone" from the Coliseum Arena, too. The game between his Philadelphia 76ers and the Warriors (7:30 tipoff, KNBR 680 Radio) will be his final one here as he plays out his final NBA season. Fortunately, Erving can't take our memories with him.

There are myriad ways to account for Erving's 16 seasons of

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greatness, dating to when he broke in with the ABA's Virginia Squires in 1971. But Erving explains it best.

"I dare to be great," he says. "Unless you dare to be great, you can't be and never will be."

Erving never wanted the law of gravity to restrict what he could do.

"I dream about flying a lot," he said after a magical performance in 1983. "I just find myself floating out in space as if I had wings. I stay up a lot longer when I'm dreaming. I go sideways, backwards, do somersaults... It's a fun way to sleep. Sometimes your dreams just seem so real.

"After you understand the fundamentals of the game, the artistry and creativity come from dreams and experimentation."

It took Ray Wilson, Erving's high school coach on Long Island, a few years to understand Erving's quest for the unknown. Young Julius would make a remarkable move, and Wilson recalls thinking, "He was pretty lucky."

Wilson concedes that he was "imposing my limitations — something I couldn't do, I assumed he couldn't do." When an Erving move surprises him now, Wilson says, "I just shake my head and say he marches to a different drummer."

Erving implants indelible memories. In the 1980 NBA finals against the Lakers, he swooped down the right side of the lane, curled under the basket with his arm and the ball extended out of bounds, then hooked around flat-footed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for a reverse bank shot. Best shot I've ever seen, but probably far from the best Erving ever made.

Jack McMahon, the Warriors' director of player personnel, watched Erving for 10 years in Philadelphia. He's seen all the maneuvers, but the Erving deluxe was a display of sheer power.

In a playoff game against Washington, "he took one down the middle hard and strong on Elvin Hayes," McMahon recalled. "You talk about 'in-your-face.' This was 'in-your-face supreme.' I loved it; I'm not an Elvin Hayes fan."

At a press conference yesterday in Oakland, Erving said his personal favorite occurred at Petersburg, Va., in his first pro exhibition game. At the University of Massachusetts, the tallest opponent Erving had faced was 6-foot-10, but the Kentucky Colonels of that era had 7-2 Artis Gilmore and 6-9 Dan Issel on the front line.

"I went around a guy named Wil Jones, and I was going to dunk the ball — just a conventional, one-handed dunk," Erving said. "While I'm going up, (Gilmore and Issel) went up, and they blocked out the basket."

"I felt myself slicing between the two of them, and I held the ball up real high. Then I saw the white



BY FREDERIC LARSON/THE

Julius Erving has leaned on his spectacular hands for much of his basketball

ERVING'S CAREER STATISTICS

ABA REGULAR SEASON RECORD

Season/Team	G	FGM	FGA	Pct.	FTA	FTM	Pct.	TR	Ast.	Pts.
71-72/Virginia	84	907	1810	.501	467	627	.745	1319	333	2290
72-73/Virginia	71	889	1780	.499	475	612	.776	867	298	2268
73-74/New York	84	897	1742	.515	454	593	.766	899	434	2299
74-75/New York	84	885	1719	.515	486	608	.799	914	462	2343
75-76/New York	84	915	1770	.517	530	662	.801	925	423	2462
ABA TOTAL	407	4493	8821	.509	2412	3102	.778	4924	1952	11662

Three-point Field Goals: 1971-72, 3-for-16 (.188); 1972-73, 5-for-24 (.208); 1973-74, 17-for-43 (.395); 1974-75, 29-for-87 (.333); 1975-76, 34-for-103 (.330). Totals, 88-for-273 (.322).

NBA REGULAR SEASON RECORD

Season/Team	G	FGM	FGA	Pct.	FTM	FTA	Pct.	TR	Ast.	Pts.
76-77/Philadelphia	82	685	1373	.499	400	515	.777	695	306	1770
77-78/Philadelphia	74	611	1217	.502	306	362	.845	481	279	1528
78-79/Philadelphia	78	715	1455	.491	373	501	.745	564	357	1803
79-80/Philadelphia	82	838	1614	.519	420	534	.787	576	355	2100
80-81/Philadelphia	81	794	1524	.521	422	536	.787	657	364	2014
81-82/Philadelphia	72	780	1428	.546	411	539	.763	557	319	1974
82-83/Philadelphia	77	605	1170	.517	330	435	.759	491	263	1542
83-84/Philadelphia	78	678	1324	.512	364	483	.754	532	309	1727
84-85/Philadelphia	78	610	1236	.494	338	442	.765	414	233	1561
85-86/Philadelphia	74	521	1085	.480	289	368	.785	370	248	1340
86-87/Philadelphia	7	54	105	.514	27	31	.871	35	25	136
NBA TOTAL	783	6891	13531	.509	3680	4746	.775	5572	3068	17495

Three-point Field Goals: 1979-80, 4-for-20 (.200); 1980-81, 4-for-18 (.222); 1981-82, 3-for-11 (.273); 1982-83, 2-for-7 (.286); 1983-84, 7-for-21 (.333); 1984-85, 3-for-14 (.214); 1985-86, 9-for-32 (.281); 1986-87, 1-for-3 (.200). Totals, 33-for-128 (.258).

hand (Issel) come down, but the black hand was still up there. Then that one finally came down, and I ended up dunking the ball (while) falling, and started running down the court.

"I really didn't know what I had done, but I looked around and the place was hysterical. From that play on, I think I was established as a pro player."

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Pride and competitiveness have always been Erving's driving forces. The past few years, he's made a conscious effort to "master all aspects of the game" instead of being just a scorer. And losing is always unacceptable.

"He and I used to play one-on-one after practice," former Virginia teammate George Irvine said, "and he'd work his tail off to make sure I didn't win. I remember only winning a few times, and those were flukes."

When Erving's pride is stung he demands immediate payback — like an ill-tempered bill collector.

Watch Erving if his shot is blocked from behind. His face scrunches up into a snarl, and he vengefully hones in on the culprit who wronged him. Invariably, his claw-like hands will swat the next shot into the crowd.

Three years ago, Erving had struggled through two bad playoff games against Milwaukee. Philadelphia writers were calling for his basketball burial: "Is it time for The Doctor to make his last house call?"

Two nights later, Erving responded with a triple-double performance. After the game, totally out of character, he didn't stick around to answer reporters' questions — he went directly from the court to the team hotel across the street.

He felt betrayed by the same reporters who'd praised him over the years, and they could read his reply in the box score. Later, he told a reporter he had dedicated that game to the "older generation." Doc was 33 at the time.

Phil Jasner, who has covered the 76ers for the Philadelphia Daily News for six years, said that was the only time he can remember Erving refusing postgame interviews. Usually he is a reporter's dream.

Erving sets aside an hour after practice every day for interviews, and after games he is often engulfed by a mass of reporters crowding around him.

It's easy to identify the least important Philadelphia players (will history remember Sam Williams or Paul Thompson?) because they're assigned the lockers next to Doc.

The 11th and 12th men almost never get interviewed, so Doc's entourage of questioners can spread into their locker space.

But access doesn't endear Erving to reporters; courtesy does. Approach Erving for an early-season interview, and before you can get to question No. 1, he's liable to ask: "How was your summer?"

How was *my* summer? That's a shocker. Players so seldom show an interest in a reporter's life that an inquiry can leave you mute.

■
In addition to pursuing business interests after retiring, Erving wants to be an ambassador for basketball. No one has better qualifications.

Rumors fly around the NBA as often as planes in an airport. Yet Erving remains untouched by rumors; his personal life is considered exemplary, above reproach.

At a time when Americans rue the breakup of the family unit, Erving sat on Denver's McNichols Arena floor during the 1984 Slam Dunk Contest and listened to advice from a coaching staff composed of his children.

If a black athlete can speak his name without stumbling on the words, it's common for him to be patronized for being "so articulate."

But Erving truly deserves the description.

A few years ago at the league meetings, he accepted an award for teammate Bobby Jones. Erving was expected to give a speech; instead, he mesmerized the audience with a tribute to his close friend, who overcame epilepsy to become a basketball star.

Unlike so many athletes who waste their money, Erving has become a respected businessman. Sure, he has his Maserati and a fur coat, and one venture into the high-fashion shoe industry flopped quickly. But now he is part owner of a Coca-Cola bottling company and a television station in Buffalo.

And though hundreds of pro athletes promise to "go back and get my degree," Erving, who left Massachusetts after his junior year, actually did so by completing his course work during two years of road trips. He had no choice; he had promised his mother he would graduate.

"It was a matter of putting something to rest that was unfinished business," he said yesterday.

"The Doctor" truly will be missed. The night Erving announced his decision to retire, a saddened Irvine said, "Julius Erving leaving basketball is like taking Mom out of apple pie."