


[MEN'S SPORTS](#)
[WOMEN'S SPORTS](#)
[CHAMPIONSHIPS](#)
[TICKETS](#)
[TELEVISION](#)
[MULTIMEDIA](#)
[ABOUT THE BIG TEN](#)
[CORPORATE PARTNERS](#)

BIG TEN CONFERENCE

The Incredible Story of Mannie Jackson

Mannie Jackson - Illinois Basketball

[Share](#)
[Print](#)
[Email](#)
[Text](#)
[RSS](#)

Feb. 10, 2011

[Big Ten Black History Month Website](#)

By Larry Watts
Contributor, BigTen.org

Now that he has more time on his hands, Mannie Jackson should finally finish writing that book. Gone are the days of traveling to 20 cities a month and working 15-16 hour days.

However, the very fit and young-sounding 71-year-old is hardly knocking on the door of retirement. Although he sold 80 percent of his ownership in the Harlem Globetrotters in 2005, the multi-millionaire still remains as the chairman of board overseeing the operation while still heading a supply line management business in Minneapolis and an internet content business in New Jersey with over two-million subscribers as well as his real estate investments.

Jackson and his wife, Cathy, have their primary home in Las Vegas but also own homes in Phoenix and San Diego. That's a far cry from the boxcar he lived in with 12 members of his extended family during the first three years of his life in Illmo, Mo.

"I started writing a book in 1994, but then I put it down and have just started it up again," says the former basketball All-American at the University of Illinois. "I've had a very weird life and I don't think I am capturing the story just right. My daughter, who is a writer for the Wall Street Journal, thinks I'm doing a pretty good job. But the trouble is I'm trying to be a nice guy and I went through some horrible times as a kid. I just don't want this to sound like I'm being self-serving."

According to Jackson, his grandfather on his father's side brought his pickup truck down to Illmo during the floods and pulled the family out of boxcar and headed off to nearby Edwardsville, Ill.

"He loaded the entire family and what little furniture we had into his pickup truck," he says. "That's how I got into the shock of integration and a formal education."

As a young boy, he would accompany his mother and grandmother around while they would clean the homes of affluent white people. As the women cleaned, Jackson would often spend time going through books.

"I never really read a full book until I was 12, so I mainly looked at the pictures," he says. "Going into these homes was actually one of the better experiences I had because you could get an idea of what could be or what was possible through what other people had. It was nice to go into a home where the temperature was modulated and they had bathrooms. I thought it was quite a perk for my family to be able to work in those places."

Jackson attended a segregated school until he entered eighth grade. He still remembers the first book he read as a 12-year-old, "Snow-Bound" by John Greenleaf Whittier.

"The segregated schools had a common book supply for all 12 grades, so the few books we did have were passed down from the public schools and not in very good shape or high demand," he says. "I liked looking at the covers and pictures and would read the profiles of the authors."

"When I got into eighth grade, I was given "Snow-Bound" to read and the teacher told me I had to do a book report. I didn't know what a book report was. I read and re-read that book and I could verbalize what I read to the teacher. But the teacher told me I had to put it into writing and from that point on I became a passionate reader and started thinking academically."

Jackson also started thinking more about basketball at the age of nine, when he made a trip to St. Louis to watch the Globetrotters play on an outdoor court.

"We weren't allowed into the high schools to watch the formal teams play, so a few of us wound up in St. Louis watching the Globetrotters," he says. "I thought it was magical and couldn't believe how people reacted to these tall, good-looking guys doing the stuff they were doing. I kept wondering how they made that ball go through the rim (on dunks) so fast."

"As fate would have it, I ran into (Globetrotters owner) Abe Saperstein that day. He was about my height and I told him I was going to play with his team some day. He told me, 'When you get through with college, come see me.'"



Mannie Jackson broke racial barriers through his years as a former All-American on the Illinois basketball team and later as owner of the Harlem Globetrotters.

I walked away thinking, 'What the hell does college have to do with it?' he added. "But the thought of playing with the Globetrotters never left my mind. I remember the first time I dunked a basketball at the age of 12 and it got so much positive attention. I was obsessed with the game at that point. I played it, studied it and went to Globetrotter movies. I finally got to the point where I could dunk a basketball."

Jackson and longtime friend Govoner Vaughn were two of only seven blacks entering Edwardsville High School during the second year of integration in 1952. By their senior year, they led Edwardsville to its lone appearance in the state basketball finals, losing 67-65 to back-to-back champion Rockford West in Huff Hall at the University of Illinois.

"Govoner and I often talk about it now and we wish we had the passion then that we now have for winning and doing things," says Jackson, who was an All-State selection his senior year. "I wish someone had instilled that in me at an earlier age. We were 10-15 points better than that team, but we took it so casually and it didn't really affect us that we had lost. All we were thinking about was the next step."

Jackson was only a 16-year-old senior when he played in the state championship.

"I guess I must have leapfrogged a couple of years earlier in school," he says. "Schools really didn't keep track of things that well. I often wonder what I would have done in high school or at the university level had I had those two extra years. What that did was it put me in front of everybody real early in life."

The next step for Jackson was to select a school between offers from Seton Hall, Marquette and Illinois. Vaughn had already committed to Illinois.

"Govoner and I were best buddies and we had always been winners, so I figured I would have the best chance to get as far as I could with someone I knew," he says. "I knew we would be winners at Illinois."

On their three seasons on the court, the best Jackson and Vaughn could do was lead the Illini to a 16-7 record in their senior year, when Jackson, a 6-2 guard, led the team with 16.4 points per game and was named an All-American. The pair became the first black starters for the Illini as sophomores. Jackson, a two-time All-Big Ten honoree, also became the first black captain in his senior year.

Jackson vividly remembers dropping 26 points on Butler during the season opener of his sophomore year. There were over 1,000 fans from Edwardsville in attendance. As he and Vaughn were celebrating, an assistant coach pulled Jackson aside.

"He told me I had a lousy game," Jackson says. "I said we won the game and I just hit 13 of 15 shots. His response was, 'Who did you help?' He then told me I would have to set goals of 10 rebounds and 10 assists per game if I wanted to keep my starting position."

"I was so aggravated because I had been a high scorer all my life, close to 30 points per game in high school," he added. "I didn't find out he was right until I got to New York for a tryout with the Knicks because with my size, as a point guard, I had to be a different player. I was 26 or 27 years old by the time I finally figured it out, but I was at the end of my basketball career by that time."

Off the court, the Champaign-Urbana community was not very welcoming to black students. Jackson and Vaughn had to live in old Army barracks on the parade ground the first couple of years before finally moving into a dorm near Huff Hall and they would have to go across the tracks into the black community in order to get meals and a haircut.

"I still don't know what it is like to have a campus lifestyle as a student," Jackson says. "We were there as colored kids to play basketball and that was the extent of our lifestyle. As soon as the weekend hit, we would try to get back to Edwardsville or some place where we could have a social life because there was zero social life and acceptance in that community. No one cared."

"Had I not gone to school with someone I had known all my life or been able to make that two-hour drive back to Edwardsville on the weekend, I probably wouldn't have lasted. Every time I told my mother I wasn't going back, she pushed me out the door on Monday morning."

Fortunately, Jackson and Vaughn did make friends with a couple of restaurant owners.

"We would come in the back door and they would have a table for us and bring us anything we wanted," Jackson says. "Our favorite was two hamburgers, two chocolate malts and a fruit cocktail."

Graduating with a degree in physical education in 1960, Jackson headed to New York for a tryout with the Knicks. However, the NBA had an unofficial limit on the number of black players on a team at the time and Jackson was a casualty during training camp.

Saperstein then brought him over to the Globetrotters, fulfilling Jackson's prediction as a young boy. Although he only played with the Globetrotters for four years, it may have been the best education Jackson ever received because Saperstein took him under his wing.

"I became Abe's guy," Jackson says. "When we went to Europe, he would take me around for photo shoots. It was a great history lesson. We talked about places he had been, sights he had seen and people he had met."

"He also talked about the team, how it worked, how he marketed it and what he thought we should be doing. I was taking notes like crazy and he kept telling me, 'You're going to be doing what I'm doing some day.' Abe used to say, 'Mannie doesn't know what he knows and what he's going to be.'"

Saperstein was laying the groundwork for an incredible journey both as a player and eventual owner for Jackson. The list of world leaders he has met includes at least seven U.S. presidents, Fidel Castro, Nikita Khrushchev, the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King as well as many others.

"I had a 15-minute audience and was blessed by Pope Paul VI at the Vatican in front of 85,000 people," he says. "The Pope was very intrigued by my work with youth."

Years later, as the owner of the Globetrotters, Jackson was requested by Prince Charles to fly in for a weekend visit. He arrived on a Friday night and the two spent 36 hours non-stop traveling around London talking with minority entrepreneurs about investments and private equity.

At the end of his playing days with the Globetrotters, he went to Detroit to attend graduate school. But he never finished his degree because his course took a new direction upon meeting someone who worked at General Motors.

"He was a high flyer at GM and was very concerned about the riots in Detroit at the time," Jackson says. "He wanted me to meet his boss and I was hesitant because I didn't think they were hiring people of color, but he talked me into it."

"I wound up getting a job at General Motors and was introduced as Mannie Jackson, the colored kid who scored a 46 on his Wunderlich test. I did well and had two great jobs at GM before moving on to Minneapolis to work with Honeywell (in 1968)."

At Honeywell, Jackson was put in charge of entrepreneurial work into new ventures and started up the telecommunications division. He worked his way up the ranks, eventually becoming senior vice president.

During his time at Honeywell, Jackson met with five other black executives in various companies and founded the Executive Leadership Council for African-American corporate executives.

"Like we found out in college, the isolation of African-Americans was significant in the corporate world," he says. "We just got together one night to share our experiences and see if we could help each other. The offshoot was we each listed two people we could bring to the next meeting and we found out who inside each company was making decisions so we could work with them. We had this confidential network to make us better employees and to make our companies better. It was all hush-hush in the beginning because corporations were always scared of black people meeting as a group."

After three years, the group organized a dinner and invited all their bosses and CEOs so they could hear the story of what they had been doing. According to Jackson, the group has now grown to nearly 1,000 members.

By 1991, the International Broadcasting Company, which had owned the Globetrotters for five years, filed for bankruptcy. Jackson put together a group of investors to purchase the franchise for six million in 1993.

"The original plan was to dissolve the Trotters," he says. "I was going to take the brand name, Harlem Globetrotters, and merchandise it by selling memorabilia, doing a movie and getting a book written."

But Jackson started having second thoughts when finalizing the paperwork during a celebration in Harlem. The purchase made him the first African-American to own a major sports and entertainment corporation. The small celebration in Harlem grew to an estimated 20,000 people, according to folklore, and streets had to be shut down.

"It was a fun thing that got scary after awhile," he says. "But I suddenly realized this thing (the Globetrotters) still had legs and I was going to make something out of this."

Having changed his mind about the Globetrotters' future, Jackson took on the task of changing the team's image. Although he still wanted to put forth an entertaining product, he wanted to tilt the scale more toward serious basketball rather than clown princes of the court.

"I had learned from studying brand management of the founders and I wanted to go back to Abe's roots," he says. "I thought this still had the legs to stand on Abe's original foundation, but it had migrated into pure comedy."

Jackson's three goals were to continue to be the worldwide ambassadors Saperstein took great pride in, put on a good show for the family and to be ranked among the top-five teams in the world playing basketball.

"Entertaining families works, but it works better if you're playing the Argentine national team rather than the Washington Generals," he says. "This was a team in its heyday that beat the Minneapolis Lakers after they won back-to-back NBA titles. I wanted a chance to prove we could be world champions and could beat the Lakers and Celtics of today."

Fielding three Globetrotter teams, Jackson began intensifying the schedule while seeking to become the world's best. In 1995, an all-star team led by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar played the Trotters in an 11-game series throughout Europe. Jabbar's club only won once, 91-85, in Vienna, Austria, but that lone win ended a Globetrotter winning streak of 8,829 games spanning 24 years.

Beefing up the schedule with exhibition games against Division I teams, the Globetrotters lost an unheard of six straight games during one stretch in 2002 and Jackson fired his head coach. But 2002 also brought the franchise one of its most rewarding moments, induction into the NBA Hall of Fame.

"We would beat the Puerto Rican national team one night and lose to Ohio State the next," says Jackson. "We were playing globetrotter-style basketball not once or twice a week, but every night. I think our players just ran out of gas."

By 2005, Jackson had finally run out of gas in his effort to drive the new Globetrotter model to the top of the world. He sold 80 percent of his holdings and stepped down as CEO two years later while remaining chairman of the board and a 20 percent owner.

"I gave it a shot and I thought we needed a new model," he says. "I did a lot of stupid things, but I did a lot of good things as well. The tough part is I still believe I was right. The new group (of owners) has made the right decision for them to focus on family entertainment, no more playing colleges and pros."

Jackson had taken the Globetrotters from near-bankruptcy to a five-fold revenue increase while making millions of dollars in contributions to relief charities around the world. In 1993, Black Enterprise Magazine named him one of the nation's 40 most powerful and influential African-American executives.

In addition to the many donations to disaster relief, Jackson has served on the board of directors of six Fortune 500 companies and gave the commencement address during the 2008 graduation ceremonies at the University of Illinois. Jackson, who serves on several boards and committees at his university, and his family also presented a \$2 million gift to create the Mannie L. Jackson Illinois Academic and Enrichment Program to benefit the College of Applied Sciences. The program is intended to provide first-generation college students and students from under-represented groups with mentorship, academic skill development, career leadership training and one-on-one support.

"I looked out at the audience and saw young, old, Asians, African-Americans and people from all over the United States assembled and proud because they have arrived at a point where they could say they were educated," he says. "I'm in love with community education and the fact there is such an incredible mixture of rural and urban students coming through Illinois. The Big Ten is unique in being centrally located in the United States and there's something to be said about people from the Midwest in terms of work ethic, honesty, value systems and diversity. These kids come right from the breadbasket of our nation to become doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers and scientists."

"I had some tough times at Illinois, but I never appreciated the people, teachers and leaders who were there. All I thought about was the coaches."

And Jackson hasn't forgotten his roots. He currently is working on refurbishing the old segregated school he attended on Main Street in Edwardsville and turning it into an education center. He is still waiting for the charter to be signed.


"That school was going to be demolished and everyone wanted to forget about it," he says. "I want it to be remembered as what segregation was like in this part of the world. It should be something we all can be proud of and it will recognize the potential of people, regardless of color and

background. My goal is to be a champion in where our priorities should be."

Turning 72 in May, Mannie Jackson is still going strong and it appears as though this book has no ending in sight.

Big Ten Athletics News

 [Printer-friendly format](#)

 [Email this article](#)

CBSSPORTS.COM
COLLEGE NETWORK

Visit other CBS Interactive Sites
[BNET](#)

© 2011 CBS Interactive. All rights reserved. | [Privacy Policy \(UPDATED\)](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [About Us](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Feedback](#) | [XML](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)