

UNBREAKA-BULL

Undeterred by a debilitating stomach virus before Game 5 of the 1997 NBA Finals, Michael Jordan once again put the Bulls on his back in a must-win situation



MICHAEL JORDAN woke up drenched in sweat, shaking, afraid that someone might have poisoned his food and that he was going to die.

Fear is not usually part of Michael Jordan's repertoire. Jordan is the one who inspires panic. "The best way to evaluate a player is to look in his eyes and see how scared he is," he once said. So what was Jordan supposed to make of this feeling, lying in a hotel room in Utah and barely able to move? He didn't think it was real. He thought it was a nightmare. Game 5 of the 1997 NBA Finals between the Chicago Bulls and the Utah Jazz was in two days.

The team doctors determined that Jordan had a stomach flu and there was no possible way he would be well enough to play in Game 5. MJ spent the next day lying in bed, unable to sleep or eat, while the rest of the team practiced. It was a must-win for the Bulls. The Jazz had won the previous two games in a row, and playing at home, they had every possible advantage.

Three hours before tip-off, a side door to the Delta Center opened, and a pale and bleary Jordan walked into the stadium. He was clearly still ill, but if Jordan said he wanted to play, what choice did the Bulls have? In the first quarter, Jordan was barely able to drag himself up and down the court, and the Jazz took advantage by jumping out to a convincing 16-point lead. It looked like Utah was going to run away with it, but in the second quarter, MJ's desire to win took over, carrying his flu-ridden body to a 17-point outburst.

The game's momentum swung back and forth between the two teams, based on Jordan's ability to keep his virus under control. At times he was unstoppable; at other times he was forced to slow down and the Jazz would go on a scoring spurt. Down by eight going into the fourth, the Bulls relied on Jordan during a 10-0 run to take the lead with five minutes left on the game clock. But it wasn't over yet.

With 46.5 seconds remaining and the score 85-84 in favor of the Jazz, Jordan went to the line to shoot two. He made the first and tied up the game, but he missed the second. Toni Kukoc tipped it back to Jordan, who reset the play. With 26 seconds left, Jordan launched a three with John Stockton's hand in his face. The ball passed quietly through the hoop.

The moment the clock reached zero and he knew the Bulls had won the game, Jordan collapsed from exhaustion and had to be carried off the court by Scottie Pippen. Today, looking back at that image, there's little doubt that the real source of Jordan's greatness was that he just wanted to win more than anyone else. 