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Sporting Heroes: Interviews with Mike Krzyzewski and Jerry Reinsdorf

TIMOTHY J. GILFOYLE

Few Chicagoans have transformed American sports as much as Mike Krzyzewski and Jerry Reinsdorf. Since 1980, when he was named the head men's basketball coach at Duke University, Krzyzewski has won four National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championships and led the United States national basketball team to gold medals in the 2010 world championships and the 2008 and 2012 Summer Olympics. His 957 victories after the 2013 season make him the winningest basketball coach in major college basketball history.



Reinsdorf is the chairman and owner of two of the city's most beloved professional franchises: the Chicago Bulls and the Chicago White Sox. His teams have delivered a combined seven world championship titles to the city. During the 1990s, the Bulls captured six championships (1991–93, 1996–98) and were the most dominant professional team in the United States. Reinsdorf was also responsible for the construction of three major sports facilities: New Comiskey Park (1990), now U.S. Cellular Field; the United Center (1994); and the Sheri L. Berto Center (1992) in suburban Deerfield. In 2005, when the Chicago White Sox won the World Series, he became only the third owner in the history of North American sports to win championships in two different sports.

Reinsdorf was born on February 25, 1936, in Brooklyn, New York. His parents Max and Marion (Smith) Reinsdorf were the offspring of Polish Jewish immigrants. "My father was born in Brooklyn and raised in Brooklyn," Reinsdorf remembers. "My mother was born in Elkhart, Indiana." Reinsdorf recalls a happy but migratory childhood: "We moved every year almost, as my father made a little bit more money, they would move to a little nicer apartment," he explains. For one year, the family moved to Los Angeles while his father worked a night job at MGM. "But he couldn't stand being away from Brooklyn; Brooklyn was all he knew," says Reinsdorf, "so in 1944, we moved back."

Mike "Coach K" Krzyzewski (left), recipient of the 2013 Amos Alonzo Stagg Making History Award for Distinction in Sports, and Jerry Reinsdorf (above), recipient of the 2007 George Halas Making History Award for Distinction in Sports.



Krzyzewski grew up in Chicago's Ukrainian Village. Left: His childhood home at 2029 West Cortez Street. Photograph by Timothy J. Gilfoyle, 2013.

Krzyzewski has similarly modest Polish origins. He was born on February 13, 1947, in Chicago; his parents William and Emily D. Krzyzewski were the children of Polish Catholic immigrants. His maternal grandfather Josef Pituch arrived at Ellis Island in 1908 and migrated to Keisterville in western Pennsylvania. Josef's daughter Emily moved to Chicago as a teenager, met and married William Krzyzewski, and raised their two sons, William and Michael, on the second floor of a two-flat at 2039 West Cortez Street in the Ukrainian Village neighborhood west of downtown Chicago.

Krzyzewski recalls his idyllic, safe 1950s neighborhood. "I walked to school from the time I was five years old, to St. Helen [Elementary School], which was about three and a half blocks away." According to Krzyzewski, "the city then was like a series of villages, so people were accustomed just to let their kids go to school by themselves." At the Columbus Elementary School playground two blocks from home, "we could play baseball, football, basketball with no parental supervision."

Krzyzewski and Reinsdorf each recognize their parents' distinctive struggles. Max Reinsdorf has been described as a sewing-machine peddler. But his son describes him as a jack-of-all-trades. "He did everything. He drove a cab. He drove an ice cream truck. He got involved with some guy where they would buy old sewing machines. He'd drive around upstate New York, buy old



The 2007 Making History Awards celebrated the historic achievements of (pictured from left) William A. Osborn, the Tribune Company accepted by Dennis Fitzsimmons, Dr. Margaret Burroughs, Jerry Reinsdorf, and Marshall Field V. Photograph by Dan Rest.

sewing machines that weren't even electric, bring them back to Brooklyn, and they would electrify and then sell them." His father also attended bankruptcy and Internal Revenue Service auctions to buy goods he could resell. "There's a Yiddish word for it: a tumbler," explains Reinsdorf. "He probably had more money in his pocket at any one time than he had in his bank account."

Neither of Krzyzewski's parents finished high school. William was an elevator operator, including twenty-five years in the Willoughby Tower in the Loop. Emily worked as a nighttime cleaning woman at the Chicago Athletic Club. "When I was growing up, my dad, when he worked, didn't use the name Krzyzewski," adds Krzyzewski. "If people had an accent [or] a funny last name, it was tough for them to get work, so my dad went by Kross." Even when William Krzyzewski died in 1969, his military tombstone in St. Adalbert Cemetery was inscribed with "Kross." After Krzyzewski's mother died in 1996, he and his brother William corrected the name on their father's tombstone.

High school and college were instrumental for both Krzyzewski and Reinsdorf. The latter began attending Brooklyn Technical High School, but "I realized right after I got there that it wasn't for me because their emphasis was on architecture and engineering and drawing, and I had no skills in that," Reinsdorf recounts. "After two weeks, I reluctantly transferred to Erasmus High School, where I had a fabulous four years. When it came time for college, Reinsdorf entered George Washington University in Washington, DC. "That was the seminal decision that made my life," concludes Reinsdorf. "It made me a different person. All I cared about in high school was [to] get out of school, go home, listen to the Dodger game on the radio, and go play stickball with my friends. College got me into these various activities. It's where I finally realized I could be somebody."

In 1957, Reinsdorf planned on attending George Washington University Law School on a scholarship. A week before classes started, however, "The scholarship dean called me in and said you can't be on the university's payroll twice," remembers Reinsdorf. "You've got a scholarship, and you've got a job in the auditorium. You've got to give up one or the other." Reinsdorf insisted that was unfair. "The guy who had the auditorium job last year was on a football scholarship," to which the dean replied, "Football's different."

Reinsdorf had applied and been accepted to the Northwestern University School of Law. "My mother-in-law [who lived in Chicago] called Northwestern and talked to the assistant dean," remembers Reinsdorf. She negotiated half a scholarship for her son-in-law. "I was so angry with GW that I took it and left."

Within weeks, Reinsdorf had moved to Chicago and was living with his wife's parents in Beverly at 99th Street and Campbell Avenue and commuting downtown. Today Reinsdorf is a life trustee of Northwestern.

While Reinsdorf was finishing law school, Krzyzewski was starting at Archbishop Weber High School in Chicago, a Catholic prep school for boys. At Weber, Krzyzewski came under the tutelage of two mentors: Fr. Francis Rog and Coach Al Ostrowski. He describes Rog as "a brilliant man and good guy, a mentor for a lot of kids. He explained things in a way which made me feel less guilty about just being human." Before attending Weber, Krzyzewski had never played any organized sports. Ostrowski not only encouraged Krzyzewski, but "he believed in me more than I believed in me!" exclaims the Duke coach. "He saw something. He would make me do extra conditioning and assert myself. He told me, 'You can shoot the ball anytime you want. You're the leader.'"

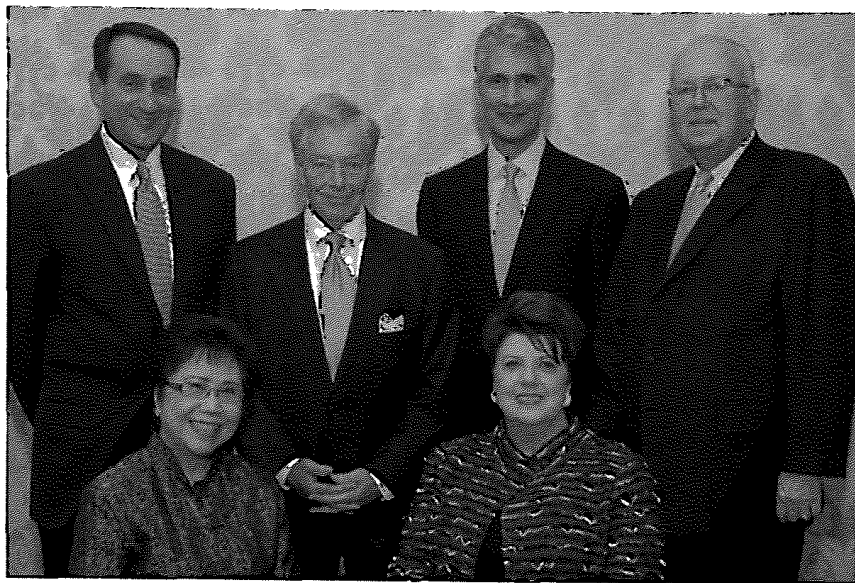
The influence of these two mentors was life-lasting for Krzyzewski. "I could not believe that two people had this impact on me. I wanted to have that impact on people. You can if you become a teacher or coach. So that was my goal, to be a high school teacher and coach, because I could not imagine anything greater than to have an impact on another human being."

At Weber, Krzyzewski led Chicago's Catholic Basketball League in scoring for two years, averaging between twenty-two and twenty-five points per game. "I probably would have gone to Creighton or [the University of] Wisconsin. Recruiting was not sophisticated at that time," recalls Krzyzewski. Then Coach Bobby Knight of the United States Military Academy at West Point came to a game. "He was actually recruiting a guy from Loyola Academy," remembers Krzyzewski. Instead, Knight convinced the teenage Krzyzewski to come to West Point where he captained the Army basketball team in his senior season (1968–69) and led the team to the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

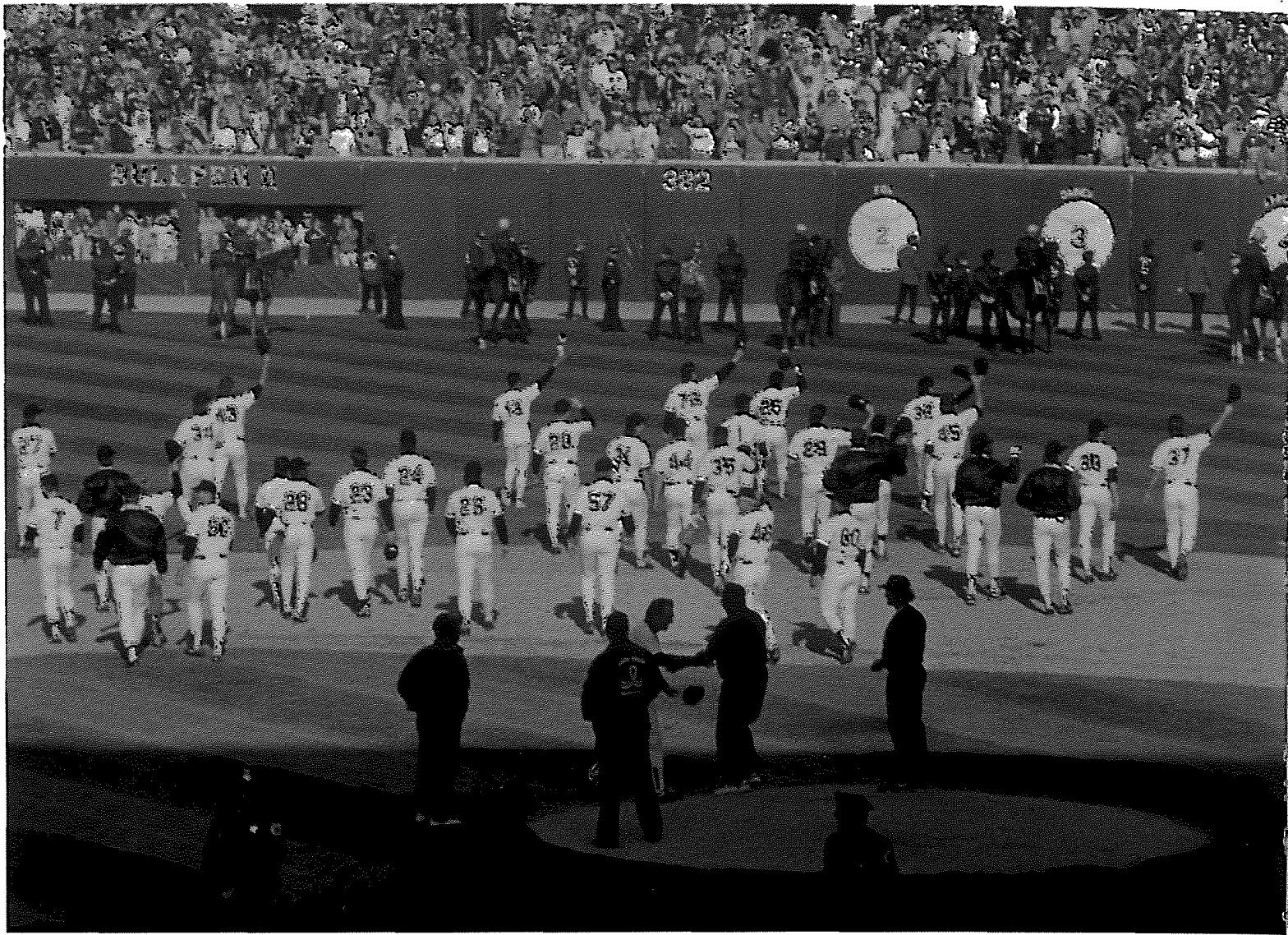
West Point was challenging for Krzyzewski. "I came close to flunking French and electrical engineering," he remembers. Worse yet, he failed physical education. "I didn't know how to swim, and I never had done gymnastics. Freshman year I had swimming, gymnastics, boxing, and wrestling. I had to go three times a week early in the morning before class with a number of other guys in fatigues and boots and learn how to swim in survival swimming."

That setback had a profound impact on Krzyzewski's later coaching philosophy. West Point "put you in positions where you fail and then teaches you that failure is never a destination," he summarizes. "You figure out how you will not fail, and you have to figure it out with someone else. So you either team up with that teacher, you team up with a classmate, but teamwork will get you to do things that you could not do alone."

Reinsdorf had a plan when he entered Northwestern's law school. "I had figured out in college that I was going to be a tax lawyer. As a part of the



The Museum proudly recognized the 2013 Making History Award recipients (pictured clockwise from left): Mike Krzyzewski, John F. Sandner, United Airlines accepted by Jeffery A. Smisek, John and Jeanne Rowe, and Bernarda "Bernie" Wong. Photograph by Dan Rest.



Above: Chicago White Sox players wave farewell to fans at the close of the final game at old Comiskey Park, September 30, 1990. Left: The original Comiskey Park during demolition next to a walkway leading to the new Comiskey Park, June 1991. Photographs by Melody Miller.

accounting curriculum, you had to take a tax accounting course, and people were struggling with this course. I got hundreds on my exams; there was nothing to it. My brain was oriented toward taxes." Reinsdorf's first job after law school was with the Office of Chief Counsel of the Internal Revenue Service, first at 17 North Dearborn Street, and then in the Pure Oil Building at 35 East Wacker Drive. "I got to watch Marina City being built by looking out my office window," he recalls.

Reinsdorf was in collection litigation: dealing with individuals with outstanding tax liabilities. "The first day I walked in, they gave me a file and said, 'Collect money from this guy.' I looked at it—it [was] Bill Veeck." The Chicago White Sox owner had been audited and a tax liability determined, but he was unable to pay. "It was my job to collect it or work something out," remembers Reinsdorf. "So I worked out some kind of a payment plan with his lawyer."

Reinsdorf remained at the IRS for four years before moving to the law firms of Chapman and Cutler in 1964 and Katten, Muchin, and Zavis in 1968. Reinsdorf's tax expertise led to his involvement in the emerging real estate syndication market. He organized a group of investors in 1971 and created one of the earliest public real estate limited partnerships, which in turn led to his own real estate syndication company, Balcor, in 1973. Almost a decade later, Reinsdorf sold Balcor for more than \$100 million to Shearson Lehman Brothers. The sale of Balcor made Reinsdorf wealthy enough to join law school classmate Eddie Einhorn in buying the Chicago White Sox from Bill Veeck for \$19 million in 1981 and a controlling interest in the Chicago Bulls in 1985.

Reinsdorf acknowledges that the purchase of the White Sox by a Brooklyn Dodgers fan was unusual. "If you lived in Brooklyn in the 1940s, your primary religion was the Dodgers," he admits. "At the end of September 1957, the Dodgers announced they were moving. At that point, I said, forget baseball. I lost all interest. I was bitter." But one day in the 1970s, when Reinsdorf and his family lived in Highland Park, his eight-year-old son Michael came home and declared: "I'm a White Sox fan." Reinsdorf started taking his children to games at Comiskey Park. "My interest over the years in baseball started to come back."

One day Reinsdorf thought, "Bill Veeck has owned the White Sox for five years. He has never owned anything for more than five years." Reinsdorf asked his former law partner Al Muchin to approach a client who was one of Veeck's minority investors and see if the White Sox owner was interested in selling the team. He was. "So I go down, meet with Veeck, and we end up shaking hands on a deal for \$19 million."

Reinsdorf began his thirty-third season as chairman of the White Sox in 2013, the longest ownership tenure in franchise history, ahead of club founder Charles Comiskey (1901–31) and currently the longest as a controlling owner among all Major League baseball clubs. Reinsdorf's White Sox teams have captured American League division championships four times (1983, 1993, 2000, and 2005). The only Chicago teams with more division titles during those years are the Bears and the Bulls.

Upon graduating from West Point, Krzyzewski was required to complete five years of military service, although he kept playing basketball for a traveling all-Army team. After resigning from the service in 1974 with the rank of Captain, Krzyzewski lost no time in pursuing his dream to be a head coach. He immediately joined the staff of his old Army coach, Bob Knight, at Indiana University as a graduate assistant. After one year with Indiana, Krzyzewski returned to his alma mater as head coach of the Army Cadets. Krzyzewski led West Point to a 73–59 record and one NIT berth in five seasons. Then on March 18, 1980, Krzyzewski was the surprise choice for the head coaching

position at Duke University. He was only thirty-three years old.

Krzyzewski remembers waiting in the Raleigh-Durham airport after his third and final interview at Duke. He received a message to return to campus where he was offered the job. He immediately called his wife. "I said they offered me the job, and I accepted," explains Krzyzewski.

She said, "Well, that's great." Then she queried, "How much are we going to get paid?"

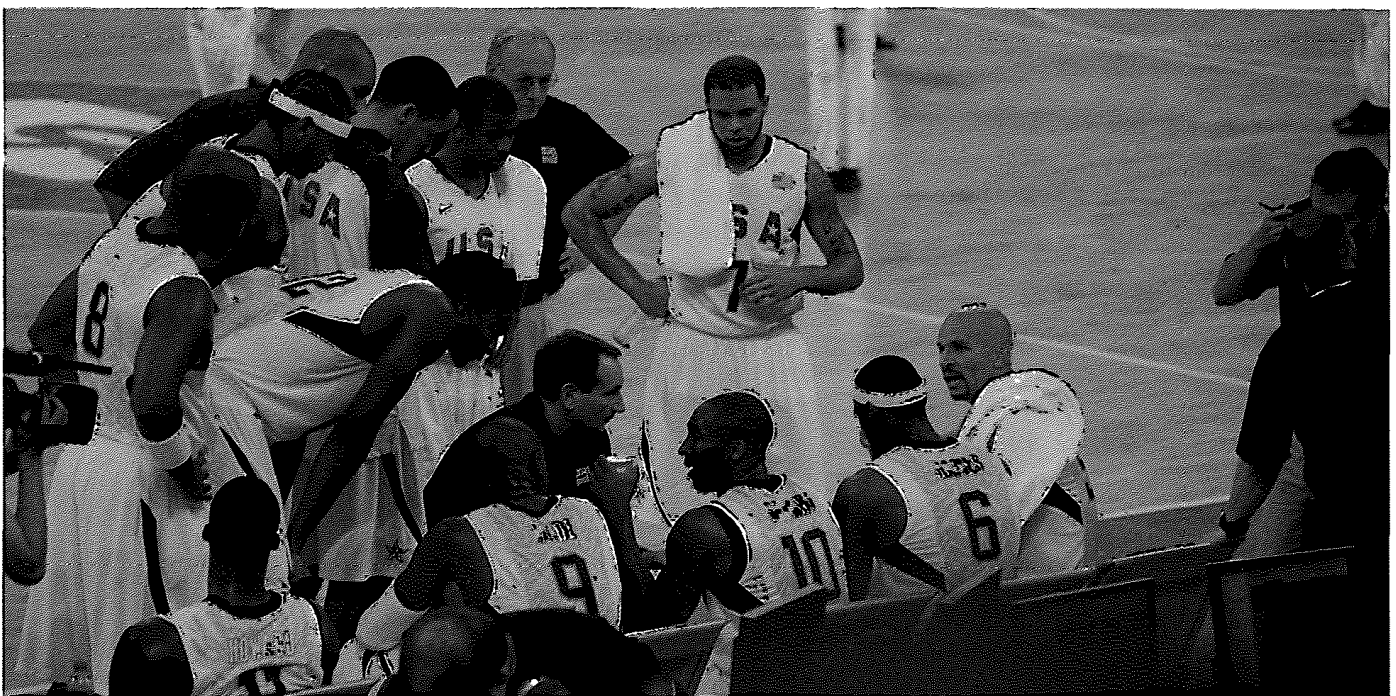
Krzyzewski paused. "I don't know," he answered. "I never asked them." He admits retrospectively, "It was the way you did things. There weren't agents." Krzyzewski ultimately earned \$40,000 in his first year at Duke. In 2004, the Los Angeles Lakers of the National Basketball Association (NBA) offered the head coach position to Krzyzewski for a forty-million dollar salary and partial ownership of the team. He turned down the offer to remain at Duke.

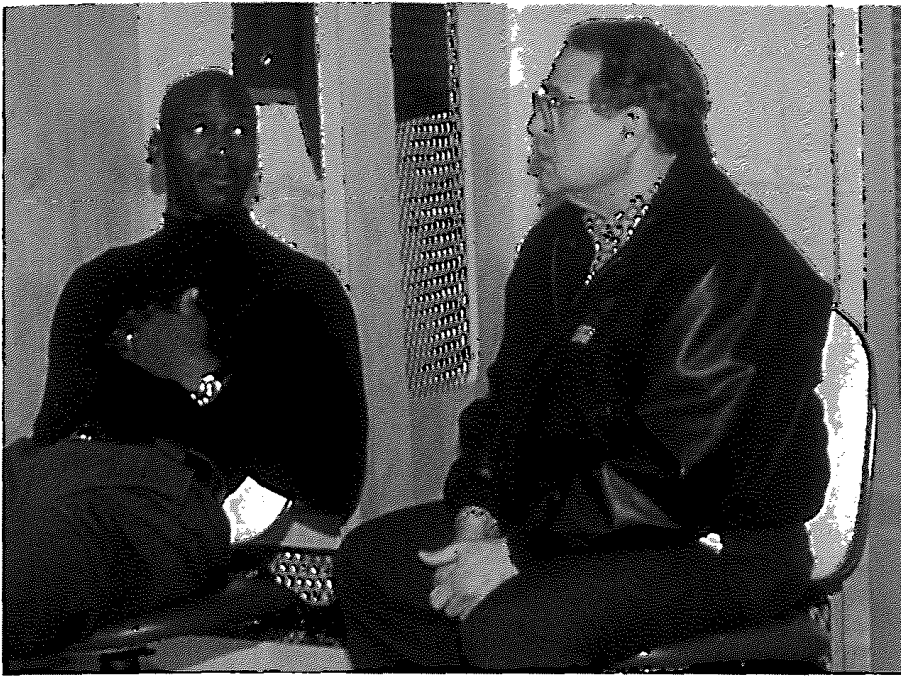
Krzyzewski led Duke through several rebuilding seasons before he and the Blue Devils became a fixture on the postseason national basketball scene with thirty tournament berths in thirty-three years. From 1996 to 2013, Duke qualified for eighteen consecutive NCAA tournament invitations. Krzyzewski's eleven NCAA tournament Final Fours (the national semifinals), five consecutive Final Fours, and twelve wins in Final Four games is exceeded only by UCLA's John Wooden (12, 9, and 21, respectively). Krzyzewski's NCAA tournament record of 79–24 and .767 winning percentage are the best among active coaches. His Duke teams have won thirteen Atlantic Coast Conference championships and won four national championships.



A graduate of and former head coach at West Point, Krzyzewski returned to speak at his alma mater on April 27, 2010. Photograph by Ahodges7.

Krzyzewski led the United States men's basketball team to Olympic gold in 2008 and 2012 and plans to return for the 2016 games. Below: Team huddle with Coach K, USA vs. China, Beijing, 2008. Photograph by Kris Krüg.





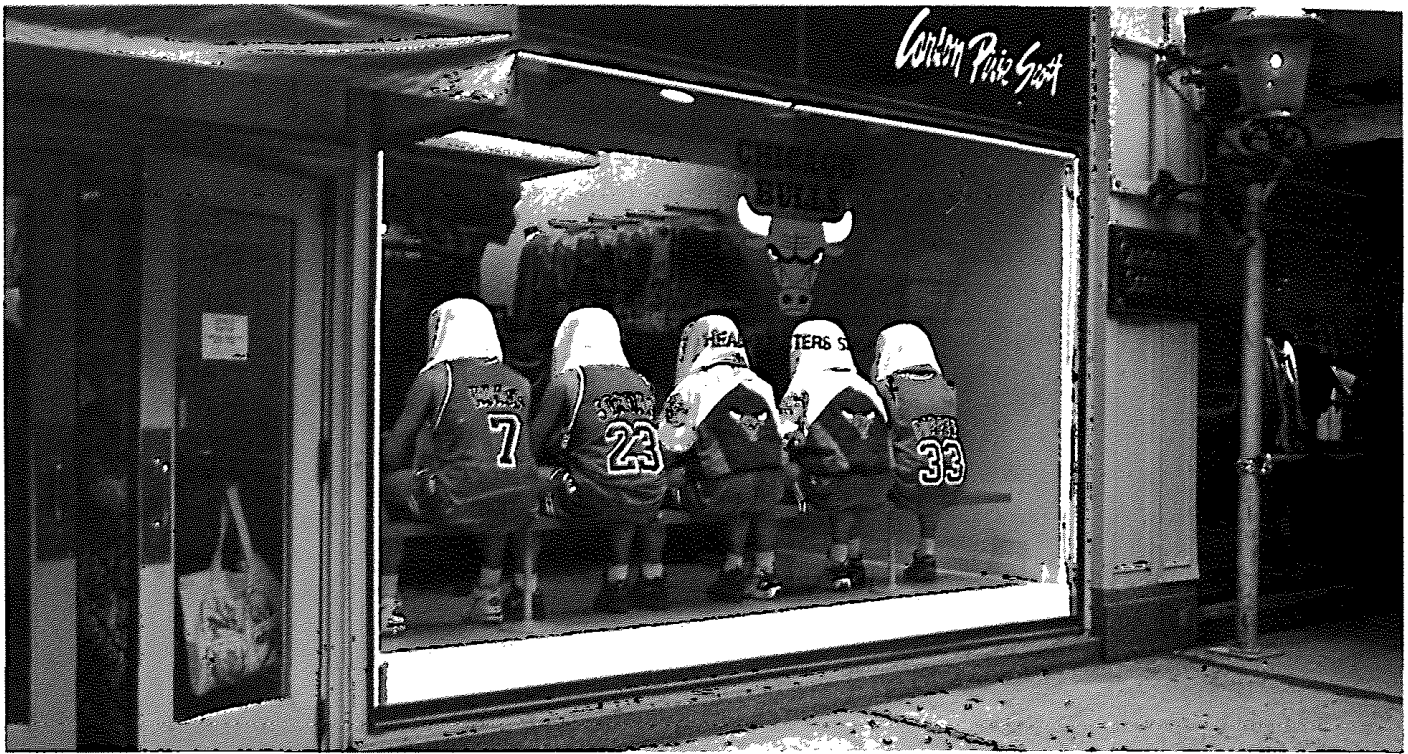
Reinsdorf (right) pictured with Michael Jordan in 1998. In June of that year, Jordan led the Bulls to their sixth overall and third consecutive NBA title. Photograph by Bill Smith.

While Krzyzewski rebuilt the Duke men's basketball program, Reinsdorf expanded his imprint on Chicago. In 1985, he purchased the Chicago Bulls as part of a syndicate for \$9.25 million. Reinsdorf quickly turned a mediocre, has-been team into an international phenomenon. The Bulls had drafted Michael Jordan only months before, and with general manager Jerry Krause and head coach Phil Jackson built the powerhouse team of the 1990s. From 1985–86 to 1997–98, the Bulls compiled a record of 712–354 for a .667 winning percentage. A team that attracted an average of only 6,365 fans per game in 1985 was filling the 17,339-seat Chicago Stadium nightly in 1987. From November 20, 1987, through Jordan's 1999 retirement, the Bulls sold out every game, and enjoyed a season ticket waiting list of 8,000. By 2004, the Bulls were the NBA's most profitable team, generating \$49 million in operating income with an estimated valuation of \$356 million.

"I've seen the size of the business grow," comments Reinsdorf. "Bill Veeck's last year, 1980, his gross income was \$12 million; in 2006 we were around \$200 million. My first payroll in 1981, the whole team was \$3.5 million. Now it's more than \$100 million." Some believe that the White Sox would fetch a price of one billion dollars if sold today. At one point during the 1990s, Reinsdorf's teams had the largest individual contracts in the histories of both the NBA (Michael Jordan) and Major League Baseball (Albert Belle). "It's still not big business compared to others," adds Reinsdorf, "but the impact on the community is enormous."

The community impact is illustrated by Reinsdorf's role in the construction of two new sports facilities in Chicago: New Comiskey Park (1991), now U.S. Cellular Field, and the United Center (1994). Building New Comiskey Park "was something that we had to do," insists Reinsdorf. "We needed to generate more revenue in the ball park, so we wanted to see if we could build suites." But by the late 1980s engineers informed him that "the ballpark is at the end of its useful life." Reinsdorf then approached his law school classmate Illinois Governor James Thompson, asked for and received Illinois state assistance to construct New Comiskey Park.

The United Center, by contrast, was "a whole different deal," explains Reinsdorf. The Bulls were so successful with Michael Jordan that the franchise built the new arena with 214 suites. "We sold them all for minimum



five- and eight-year terms. We financed the whole building off those suites,” adding, “we were the first to build a building where the financing was the revenue stream of the building.”

In building his teams, Krzyzewski emphasizes consistency. “I look for three things in a kid: he has to be good enough, he has to be prepared enough to do well here, and he has to have good character. And they’re all equal,” he explains. That consistency extends beyond the college careers of his players. “I try to maintain our culture by always hiring my own players as assistants.” Furthermore, he adds, “we have a managerial team of ten to fourteen managers who are here for four years, and they’re of equal status with our players as far as I’m concerned. They help us run everything.”

Krzyzewski’s success extends beyond the basketball court. The Duke basketball team consistently enjoys one of the highest graduation rates among NCAA Division I universities. Krzyzewski’s emphasis on education, mentoring, and character has also produced a small coterie of basketball coaches and executives. At least ten of Krzyzewski’s players and assistant coaches have become head coaches at other schools, including Tommy Amaker at Harvard, Mike Brey at Notre Dame, Chris Collins at Northwestern, and Johnny Dawkins at Stanford. Former Duke stars Danny Ferry and Billy King are currently the general managers of the Atlanta Hawks and Brooklyn Nets, respectively.

Both Reinsdorf and Krzyzewski have been leaders in local charities. The Chicago White Sox Charities and the CharitaBulls have donated millions of dollars to causes in the Chicagoland area. During the 1990s, CharitaBulls donated \$4.5 million to construct the

Carson Pirie Scott’s window display of August 1995 foreshadowed the success of the upcoming season, during which the Bulls notched the best overall record in NBA history, 87–13. Photograph by John McCarthy.

The Bulls stormed through the 1997 NBA playoffs, defeating the Utah Jazz in the finals, four games to two. Below: Reinsdorf (second from left) during the trophy presentation.



James Jordan Boys and Girls Club and Chicago Bulls Family Life Center (1996) two blocks from the United Center. The facility houses a computer center, art studio, science lab, gym, dance room, and classrooms erected in memory of Michael Jordan's father. The Chicago Bulls/Chicago White Sox Training Academy (2001), the White Sox Training Centers, and the Chicago Bulls Basketball Schools have provided opportunities for thousands of Chicagoland youth to annually participate in sports.

In Durham, Krzyzewski was instrumental in creating the Emily K Center, named in honor of his mother and adjacent to his parish of Immaculate Conception. "We raised \$7 million to build it, and you have to raise a couple million a year to keep it going," Krzyzewski explains. "We service about 1,500 kids a month and 140 of them in kindergarten through college programs, and we're going to double that next year." The Center services academically focused students in out-of-school programming to help them succeed in school, continue on to college, and break the cycle of poverty in their families. "It's crazy good," enthuses Krzyzewski. "My mom would be shocked that her name is on a building for kids who never would have gone to college [otherwise]."

Krzyzewski and Reinsdorf acknowledge that Chicago was integral to their success. Chicagoans "don't care who you are or where you came from," believes Reinsdorf. "As long as you work hard and you're honest, you're going to get ahead here."



Reinsdorf at a volunteer event to construct a new kid-inspired playground at the Salvation Army Ray & Joan Kroc Corps Community Center in August 2012.

“I take Chicago with me everywhere I am because of all the things that I learned there,” proclaims Krzyzewski. “I learned family. I learned faith. I’ve learned education. I learned that I wanted to be who I am today. I’ve learned about friendship. Those are all things that have never gone away. Chicago has been that foundation.” And he acknowledges the serendipity of it all. “I was lucky. I was lucky Josef Pituch came from Kraków and didn’t stay in those coal mining areas. I was lucky my dad’s family somehow got to Chicago. And it’s worked out pretty darn well.”

You don’t have to be a Duke fan to believe that.



In 2006, Krzyzewski founded the Emily K Center, named in honor of his mother, to provide out-of-school programming for low-income students in Durham, North Carolina. Photograph by Timothy J. Gilfoyle, 2013.

Timothy Gilfoyle is professor of history at Loyola University Chicago and author of A Pickpocket’s Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006) and Millennium Park: Creating a Chicago Landmark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

ILLUSTRATIONS | Illustrations are from the Chicago History Museum unless otherwise noted. 62, left: courtesy of Mike Krzyzewski, right: courtesy of Jerry Reinsdorf; 63, courtesy of the author; 64–65, event photography provided by the Museum’s Office of Institutional Advancement; 66, top: i35694, bottom: i68389; 68, images downloaded from Wikimedia Commons, top: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coach_K_speaking_at_West_Point,_27_Apr_2010.jpg, bottom: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Team_Huddle_With_Coach_K_\(2752766836\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Team_Huddle_With_Coach_K_(2752766836).jpg); 69, courtesy of Jerry Reinsdorf; 70, top: i68388; 70 bottom and 71, courtesy of Jerry Reinsdorf; 72, courtesy of the author.

FOR FURTHER READING | The best place to begin learning about Mike Krzyzewski is from his books: *Leading with the Heart: Coach K’s Successful Strategies for Basketball, Business, and Life*, with Donald T. Phillips (New York: Warner Books, 2000); and *Beyond Basketball: Coach K’s Keywords for Success*, with Jamie K. Spatola (New York: Warner Books, 2006). For an autobiographical account of the 2008 Olympic basketball experience, see Mike Krzyzewski, with Jamie K. Spatola, *The Gold Standard: Building a World-Class Team* (New York: Business Plus, 2009). An early biography is Gregg Doyel, *Coach K: Building the Duke Dynasty* (Lenexa, KS: Addax Publishing Group, 1999). An insightful article on the class dimensions of college basketball and Duke University is Will Blythe, “Hating Coach K,” *Esquire*, April 1, 2010, http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0306COACHK_226. For other interviews, see Mike Krzyzewski, interview with the Academy of Achievement, “Duke of the Court,” May 22, 1997, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/krz0int-1> and Susan Hines-Brigger, “Mike Krzyzewski: Life Beyond the Rim,” *St. Anthony Messenger*, March 2006, <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Mar2006/Feature2.asp>. Jerry Reinsdorf awaits his biographer. The quickest way to introduce him is through the Chicago White Sox website: http://chicago.whitesox.mlb.com/cws/team/exe_bios/reinsdorf_jerry.html. See also Jared S. Hopkins and Melissa Harris, “The Chairman,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 28, 2013; Melissa Isaacson, “Chairman of the Adored: Reinsdorf Basks in Another Title Run,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 2005; “Jerry Reinsdorf: Best Owner in Sports?” *Frank the Tank’s Slant*, July 7, 2006, <http://frankthetank.me/2006/07/07/jerry-reinsdorf-best-owner-in-sports/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerry_Reinsdorf.