

CHICAGO'S FINEST



(NY, NY) I was traveling to New York on Monday when my editor called and read me the cover language for the upcoming issue of Sports Illustrated that goes on sale tomorrow: “The best high school basketball player since LeBron James is JABARI PARKER but there’s something more important to him than NBA stardom: HIS FAITH.”

Those are two very big statements. Both true. That’s why writing Jabari’s story for SI has been one of the richest experiences of my journalism career. I’ve never met a more humble star athlete.

The first time I visited Jabari’s Chicago high school back in January, the janitor stopped me in the hallway to say: “He’s the finest young man I know.”

The janitor didn’t say a word about Jabari’s basketball abilities. In fact, while reporting this story I met dozens of strangers in Chicago who follow Jabari’s basketball career very closely. Once people learned I was profiling Jabari for SI they would tell me about his character, not his basketball prowess.

Even Chicago's mayor Rahm Emanuel, who tries to attend all of Jabari's home games, told me that Jabari has earned the right to be a role model for kids throughout the city of Chicago. Emanuel took it one step further, saying there ought to be a picture of Jabari's parents beside the words "role model" in the dictionary.



Jabari with his mother Lola after he won the award for the best basketball player in Illinois.

Photo by Deanne Fitzmaurice

After Jabari led his team to an unprecedented third consecutive state title back in March, I pulled aside all of the cheerleaders and asked them to give me the one word that comes to mind when they think of Jabari Parker. They said: "Gentleman."

As the father of two young daughters I can't think of a finer compliment for a teenage boy. In fact, it's easy to forget that Jabari is still a boy. He's barely 17. Ironically, he and I practically share the same birthday. Mine is March 14. His is March 15.

Jabari and I share something else in common. He will be the first African-American Mormon drafted into the NBA. I am the only Mormon writer for Sports Illustrated. The reason we bonded so quickly is because we've spent our lives as the only Mormons in the room, so to speak. And we like it that way.



Jeff and Jabari hours after Simeon High won the state title

That's what I love and admire about Jabari. He lives his religion. But he never wears it on his sleeve. And he respects and embraces the beliefs of everyone around him. In fact, I think it is fair to say he prefers being around people of different faiths and persuasions. He's at home in the world.



Jabari at a public park in Chicago.

Photo by Deanne Fitzmaurice

I am the same way. And working on Jabari's story introduced me to a few other Mormon athletes who are also that way. One of them is Hall of Fame quarterback Steve Young.

Like me, Steve grew up in Connecticut. He was the only Mormon at Greenwich High School. I was the only Mormon boy at my high school in Waterford. While Steve was the captain of the baseball, basketball and football teams at Greenwich, I was writing about my high school's sports teams for the school newspaper.

It's funny. When Steve was at Greenwich High he never thought he'd quarterback a team to Super Bowl championships. And when I was at Waterford High I never dreamed I'd write cover stories for Sports Illustrated.

A few weeks back I spent a day with Steve in San Francisco, talking (actually, mostly laughing) about what it was like being the only Mormons growing up in our respective towns in Connecticut. We wouldn't trade those experiences for anything.

In Sports Illustrated this week I've also written a sidebar story that features Steve Young and former Boston Celtics star Danny Ainge, who is now president of the team and a bishop for the Mormon Church in Boston.

If you are in the mood for something uplifting and inspiring, check out Sports Illustrated this week. You'll see why so many people in Chicago are rooting for a kid named Jabari Parker.



Jabari signing autographs for kids after winning the state championship.

Photo by Jeff Benedict

“Basketball is what I do,” Jabari told me. “It’s not who I am.”