

NBA

# Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: ‘I owe this man everything’

*George Hejduk helped teach the NBA’s all-time leading scorer the skyhook*



BY DEAN NELSON

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In my 24 years of interviewing great writers in front of large audiences, I have never seen a crowd respond with such adoration. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the NBA’s all-time leading scorer, was (<https://theundefeated.com/features/kareem-abdul-jabbar-on-goat-debate-upcoming-speaking-tour-and-lebron-joining-the-lakers/>) part of our annual Writer’s Symposium by the Sea (<https://www.pointloma.edu/opportunities/writers-symposium-sea>) in San



Diego to talk about writing – his social commentary, history, children’s books, fiction and his most recent book, *Coach Wooden and Me*, about his relationship with the UCLA legend.

When he and I walked onto the stage, the audience stood and cheered for several minutes. He vigorously waved to them and wore that contagious smile.

When there was trouble with the auditorium’s audio and he and I had to wait a few minutes onstage, many in the audience surged near the front to take photos. It felt like we were fish in an aquarium and people had crowded up to the glass to watch us. The longer it took the tech folks to figure out the problem, the more the crowd pressed and the closer it came to actually coming up the steps. Kareem tuned them out and kept up the conversation we had started backstage, his eyes on me the entire time. The guy could focus.

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**The day Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and the Bucks ended the longest streak in American professional sports history** (<https://theundefeated.com/features/the-day-kareem-abdul-jabbar-and-the-bucks-ended-the-longest-streak-in-american-professional-sports-history/>)

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**Kareem Abdul-Jabbar becomes oldest Finals MVP** (<http://theundefeated.com/features/nba-finals-history-kareem-abdul-jabbar-oldest-finals-mvp/>)

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**Jim Brown, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and other athletes turn ‘Words to Action’ (<https://theundefeated.com/features/jim-brown-kareem-abdul-jabbar-and-other-athletes-turn-words-to-action/>)**

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When the 50-minute interview was over and we walked to the lobby for him to sign books, I watched him briefly glance at the size of the line – about 1,000 people – and saw his face harden as he stared straight ahead to get to the book signing table. It was chaos. As the crowd shouted and screamed his name, I remembered descriptions I had read about him walking through an airport, or down a street. People were excited to see him and wanted him to look their way – which he did not do.

He sat down at the table, and the first person in line was an elderly, white-haired man who slid a book across the surface for Kareem to sign, with a Post-it note that said “To George.” As Kareem signed it, I saw someone lean in and say something to the star. I was sitting in the next chair, but the noise of the lobby was too loud for me to get it.

Kareem looked at the man, then shot to his feet and called for his assistant.

Uh-oh, I thought. I couldn’t imagine what finally made Kareem snap. Whatever it was, I went into full damage-control mode and stood up to intervene. But Kareem proclaimed this above the din:

“I owe this man everything!”

The man was George Hejduk, an 80-year-old retiree who lived in the nearby beach town of Encinitas.

Hejduk taught Kareem the skyhook.

When Kareem was in the sixth grade, he was 6 feet, 6 inches tall.

“Everyone wanted him to play basketball, but he wasn’t very good,” Hejduk told me later when I visited him at a coffee shop. “Every time he got the ball, he tried to dribble, and kids just took it away from him.”



**Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and George Hejduk at recent book signing at Writer's Symposium by the Sea in San Diego, California.**

Hejduk knew Kareem's coach, who asked him to come to the gym at St. Jude's Parish in New York to work with the tall kid.

"He was very awkward," Hejduk said. "So I stood at the top of the key, told him to put his hands in the air and come to me."

Hejduk would pass Kareem the ball up high with the instruction to not lower his hands. No dribbling. Step, look, hook. They practiced the shot for about 30 minutes.

Two years later, when Hejduk was playing at Manhattan College and Kareem was in eighth grade (now at 6 feet, 8 inches), the two played against each other in a pickup game in a neighborhood playground.

"I didn't see much of the skyhook then, but he did dunk on me twice," Hejduk said, laughing. "He worked at the shot for a couple of years, and it became the greatest shot in all of basketball. Everybody else shoots up; Kareem shoots down."

At the book signing table, Hejduk knew that the superstar didn't recognize him.

"He seemed taciturn when I gave him the book and asked him to sign it 'To George,' " he said. "When he handed the book back to me, someone said to him, 'That's George Hejduk

(<https://www.mlssoccer.com/post/2015/10/30/frankie-hejduk-says-his-father-taught-nba-legend-kareem-abdul-jabbar-his-trademark>) . ' "

They embraced like long-separated brothers.

There were still 999 people in the book signing line, so Kareem got back to work.

It's Kareem's 72nd birthday as I write this, and the NBA playoffs are underway. I think about James Harden's (<https://theundefeated.com/features/for-no-13-james-harden-his-hot-shooting-streak-is-more-than-luck/>) step-back shot, Stephen Curry (<https://theundefeated.com/features/golden-state-warriors-steph-currys-crossover-is-strong-especially-off-the-court/>)'s quick release and some of the great shooters of the past. Dirk Nowitzki (<https://theundefeated.com/features/the-color-of-love-dirk-nowitzki-opens-up-on-his-interracial-marriage/>)'s fadeaway, Reggie Miller (<https://theundefeated.com/features/nba-reggie-miller-talks-that-talk/>)'s distance, Shaquille O'Neal (<https://theundefeated.com/features/shaquille-oneal-to-help-papa-johns-pizza-reverse-course/>)'s dunks, Manute Bol's and Ralph Sampson (<https://theundefeated.com/features/the-forgotten-history-of-puma-basketball/>)'s sweeps, Michael Jordan (<https://theundefeated.com/features/michael-jordan-visits-north-carolina-sneaker-store-social-status-community-based-mission/>)'s turnarounds – but only Kareem's skyhook seems to still command the term “unstoppable.” The combination of Kareem's height and agility made it tough. That, and the ball was already in a downward trajectory when it left his hand.

When Kareem exited the auditorium, Hejduk and his daughter were waiting so they could take pictures and exchange numbers. As they hugged goodbye, Hejduk's daughter said, “You made my dad's year.”

Kareem didn't hesitate.

“He made my life.”

All evening long, the crowd had been in awe of Kareem. At the end of the night, when the audience was down to one, Kareem returned the favor.

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