



TAKOMA PEOPLE

Lee Jordan: An Appreciation

RANDY BOEHM

Who can remember Lee Jordan? Lee Jordan? The name may be familiar to kids of Takoma Park and East Silver Spring, who have been hitting their first baseballs, on a field named for Jordan in 1981. Since his passing in 1988, a whole generation of youngsters and their families have found their way into Takoma Park youth athletics without the privilege of knowing the man who guided the youth programs in our community for half a century.

Before diabetes forced his withdrawal from neighborhood sports, there was no mistaking Lee Jordan. His station wagon coursed through the neighborhoods of Takoma Park every day after school, picking up kids whose working parents couldn't get them to the daily practices "Mr. Lee" ran year round in football, basketball, baseball, and bowling. Back in the days before seat belts were mandatory, Jordan's old station wagon resembled the steerage of an Ellis Island-bound ocean liner. Twenty kids wasn't an unusual cargo. Once he was stopped by the police with twenty-eight, Jordan didn't mind it if the officer wrote a citation. What was important was that kids had something positive to do during idle hours after school. Regardless of the personal cost, Lee Jordan saw to it that every kid in Takoma Park had the encouragement and opportunity to play team sports, year round.

It all began with a break-in at the Blair High School gym in 1937. Lee Jordan was then a twenty-seven year old custodian and veteran of the Negro Baseball League. The police called the custodian to repair a window that had been broken by a bunch of teenage boys who'd gotten into the gym to play basketball one Saturday afternoon. The police wanted the window repaired. Lee Jordan wanted the names of the boys. One of them was John Benedict, future editor of the Suburban Record. He remembers that Jordan called each of their families and offered to make the gym available for basketball on Saturdays. Jordan had to contrive an excuse that required his presence at the school gym, and contrive he did. Every Saturday, "Mr. Lee" trumped up reasons why he needed to be at the gym, and as



Lee Jordan pictured with some of the children from the Takoma Park Boys and Girls Club which he helped found in 1979.

long as he was there, no one seemed to mind that the kids used the empty basketball court.

Lee Jordan's long career as a community leader had begun.

In 1937, Blair High School was a for-whites-only school. (The "colored" high school was located in Rockville.) Custodian was then the only position that an African American could fill at Blair. The boys who broke into the gym were white kids from Silver Spring. As he would throughout his career, Lee Jordan saw the matter solely as an issue of youngsters needing of wholesome recreational outlets. Lee Jordan, who was probably good enough to play in the majors but for the exclusion of blacks couldn't single-handedly dismantle America's apartheid, or even get his own kids into Blair, but he could connect with a bunch of white adolescents by helping them find a healthy recreational outlet.

Jordan could also hope that his generosity would lead to bigger things, and they did.

After he began volunteering his time for the white boys to play on Saturday afternoons, he managed to convince the principal to let him open the gym for "colored" basketball games in the evening. It was far from a perfect situation, but thanks to his first generous steps, bigger things would eventually come.

In the summer of 1937, Jordan organized integrated baseball games in Takoma Park. He was approached by a man named Warren Magner who ran the same sort of informal program in Prince George's County, and they formed a regular summer baseball league. From that point, Lee fielded neighborhood sports teams every year into the mid-1980s. The next year's basketball leagues were begun in front of his house when he attached a backboard and rim to a pole in the front yard.

Everyone who knew Lee Jordan agrees that his generosity stemmed from profound religious convictions. In 1937, the same year he launched his efforts on behalf of organized

youth athletics, Jordan became a deacon at the Parker Memorial Baptist Church on Geneva Avenue in Takoma Park.

When Lee was eight, his family escaped from the cotton plantations of Mississippi during World War I and came to Takoma Park hoping to find work in the defense industry. Truly, the family was "delivered" from the snares of southern debt peonage to working class dignity. Lee's father quickly found work. The family found a supportive predominantly African American community on Ritchie Avenue, and they became charter members of what was then the First Baptist Church of Takoma Park under the guidance of Reverend William Parker. The Christian teachings of faith and hope resonated strongly with families like the Jordan's whose status had flowered from the desperate uncertainty of sharecroppers to the relative security of the urban working class. Throughout his long life, faith and hope were driving forces that never seemed to diminish.

But there was another virtue that was even more central to Jordan's character: humility.

As a young man, Lee was an excellent all-round athlete and an especially fine baseball player. He played professionally for the Homestead Grays of the Negro Baseball League. On the weekends when the Washington Senators played away the Grays played before segregated audiences at Griffith Stadium. There, Jordan played with the likes of Satchel Paige and other greats of the old Negro league. According to many baseball historians, the greatest was future Hall of Famer Josh Gibson, catcher for the Grays. Problem was that Jordan was also a catcher. It was his fate to play behind Gibson, which meant barely playing at all. Jordan took a lesson from the experience that he carried with him for the rest of his life. You didn't need to be the star to play your role with dignity in sport or in life. Maybe the good effort is all that counts. Jordan groomed many athletic stars during his long career, but he never lost interest in the average or even the poor players. He encouraged all to keep life in perspective and to do their simple best.

As for the stars, the first was a raw young pitcher named Johnny Klippstein who transferred to Blair as a senior in 1943. Jordan heard about the young man's potential but found him terribly erratic. The old pro catcher offered to work the kid out. They set up a regimen where they met at the Blair gym an hour before school opened every day during the winter of 1943-1944. Day after day, Lee Jordan gave every bit of advice and grooming he could to the white kid who had the talent to play in the big leagues that had excluded Jordan because of his race. Day after day, Klippstein got better. He posted a sensational senior baseball season at Blair, and he was drafted to the pros where he played for two decades with the Washington Senators at his mentor's old ballpark, Griffith Stadium.

Another Blair player who Jordan took under his wing was Sonny Jackson, who had just been cut from the baseball team in his sophomore season. Again, Jordan saw the raw potential and worked with the boy on his own time, above all instilling Jackson with self-confidence. Sonny Jackson made the

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Photo by Joe Heilberger, courtesy of the Jordan Family.

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team the next year and went on to play for the Houston Astros. In 1963 he was runner-up Rookie-of-the-Year to future Hall-of-Famer Joe Morgan. There were other standout players: Steve Barber of the Baltimore Orioles, Bob Windsor of the San Francisco 49ers, Tom Brown of the Green Bay Packers, and Dematha's legendary basketball coach, Morgan Wooten—all were beneficiaries of Jordan's coaching and moral guidance.

And then there was Lee Jordan, Jr. Of Lee's five children, Lee, Jr. who inherited his father's athletic gifts. Like his dad he was also a baseball player of professional potential. At least the Los Angeles Dodgers thought so. They drafted him for their southern California farm team in the 1963. By then, Major League baseball had at last opened its doors to African Americans, and it looked like the Jordan family would finally secure a place in the big leagues. Then one night the dream was snatched away when Lee Jr. perished in a house fire at Lee's Ritche Avenue home. Lee, Sr. reacted completely in character: giving more of himself, he and his wife Helen adopted Lee Jr.'s five children.

So, in their fifties, Lee and Helen Jordan began raising a second large family in a second modest home at 107 Geneva

Avenue. By now Jordan was coaching baseball, basketball, and bowling teams. He had joined with a group of men from the Lions Club, the Parker Memorial Baptist Church and the Takoma Presbyterian Church to form the Takoma Park Boys Club in 1950. It was the only racially integrated Boys Club in Montgomery County before the demise of American segregation in the mid 1950s.

He took the very first integrated baseball team into the Montgomery County leagues. His son Maurice was a manager, and he remembers well the first season the integrated team from Takoma Park showed up on the County fields. "There was plenty of profanity and cat-calls from the bleachers," he recalls. However, Jordan insisted, as usual, only on composure and dignity from his players.

A few years later, Jordan opened the program up females, and the organization became the Takoma Park Boys and Girls Club. Jordan always coached one of the teams and served as the general manager of the program from 1950 until the mid-1980s.

He did a lot of the fund raising, recruited the coaches, bought the equipment, and organized an annual banquet at Takoma Junior High School, where he had been transferred as custodian. Harry Wickline, who raised an average of \$1,500 a year from the Lions Club for

Jordan's athletic programs remembers that the banquets were always packed. They were among the most popular events of Takoma Park. But popularity entailed costs. Even with the considerable efforts of the Lions and local merchants, some years there just wasn't enough money to purchase all the equipment for needy kids. So Jordan drew regularly from his own pocket, the

pocket of a custodian raising a second family of five kids. "Over the years, it amounted to thousands of dollars," estimates his son Maurice. "Wouldn't surprise me one bit," concurs Wickline.

In the 1960s, Jordan began to field teams outside Takoma Park. He took the very first integrated baseball team into the Montgomery County leagues. His son Maurice was a manager, and he remembers well the first season the integrated team from Takoma Park showed up on the County fields. "There was plenty of profanity and cat-calls

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In another first, Jordan opened up the County baseball league to females. The genders had been separated since the County formed the league, but in 1970, Jordan brought an athletically gifted female onto his team. Other coaches objected, and Jordan carried a personal appeal to the league's governing board. "He used the same arguments as the women's lib movement was using," recalls Wickline with a smile, "and his arguments won out."

In her first game the girl hit a home run.

Jordan retired from the custodian's job at Takoma Intermediary School in 1973 and devoted even more of his time to neighborhood athletics. He added a full-equipment, tackle football program to the Club's pre-existing baseball, basketball, and bowling programs. While he worked as a custodian, practices were held three nights a week. After he retired, practices were scheduled for five nights a week. Jordan's station wagon became a daily presence in neighborhood after neighborhood, crammed with kids, shoulder pads, helmets, spikes,

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bats, catcher's gear, basketballs, or whatever the season called for. The basement of the house on Ritchie Avenue was turned into a veritable equipment depot where Jordan's corps of volunteer coaches were welcome to help themselves to whatever they needed to equip their young players. If kids couldn't afford it, Jordan provided them with baseball gloves, cleats, football spikes, or whatever it took to get them off the streets and into his program. And get them off the streets he did. By the late 1970s, Jordan's programs included upward of 250 players a year.

Jordan didn't look for the athletically gifted kids to stock on his teams. He wanted every youngster in Takoma Park to feel welcome to play any sport with the Boys and Girls Club. If he did go out of his way to make a special pitch, it was for kids who were heading for trouble. The police often took him on cruises through tough neighborhoods to point out known trouble makers or kids they thought were drifting in the wrong direction. Jordan was often their first person to be called after the arrest of a juvenile in Takoma Park or the Montgomery County precinct. Would "Mr. Lee" be willing to take so-and-so into his program, the police would ask. The an-

swer was invariably, "yes". The next call would be to the parents who would be floored one moment with news of the arrest and then reassured that Lee Jordan was willing to take the boy in the athletic program. Charges would be dropped this time if the youngster would follow up on Jordan's offer. The regimen of daily after-school practices usually meant that the first episode of trouble was also the last.

fields in eastern Montgomery County. He says now, "Lee Jordan took dead-end kids and turned them into Sunday school boys. I'd known many of the kids he worked with, and they were tough, often unpleasant people. Then I'd see them working with Lee, and they'd be completely different."

Jeff Seals was a tough guy as a teenager. He remembers Lee Jordan as someone that the kids could bring their prob-

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"He kept a lot of boys on the right track," remembers the mother of one of the troubled kids (who's now an attorney).

"There were a lot of tough kids down in Takoma Park back then," recalls John Benedict. "Lee's rapport with those kids was absolutely amazing." Benedict doubled as the news reporter and photo editor during his early years with the Suburban Record, and these were assignments that brought him to the police stations as well as to the athletic

lems to. "You could always talk to Mr. Lee, and lots of the guys did. He was always there when you needed him." Seals recalls that there was never any fights at Lee's practices, even during the rough and tumble football practices. Nor was there any cursing. Jeff Seals went on to become an all-Met football star as a defensive end at Blair. He earned a full scholarship to the University of West Virginia, where he starred at outside linebacker. He's a man whose known much more athletic success than most,

but when he's asked the most important thing he got from Lee Jordan, he doesn't hesitate a second: "Winning wasn't important. Just do your best... and people will notice."

Pictures of Lee Jordan show a Michael Jordan-esque countenance—thin, erect, athletic in his build. A close shaven head conveys an aura of simplicity. Like Michael Jordan, Lee Jordan radiated presence. But with the eyes, the resemblance between Lee and Michael Jordan stops. Michael Jordan has the eyes of a competitor, a gambler; Lee Jordan had the eyes of a wise man, deep with understanding and sympathy.

Initiative and persistence were other qualities that Lee Jordan used effectively. He'd seek out kids at school, on street corners and at neighborhood hangouts and gently ask why they weren't joining in with the other kids on the athletic fields. He'd anticipate a kid who was slipping into self-destructive or anti-social behavior and he'd get on the case. Once there, he never gave up. Steve Downs an Assistant Principal at Takoma Junior High School saw Jordan in action every day in the corridors of the school. He says he can't remember a single instance where Lee failed to get through to a student. Adds Tom Gillette, the former Principal of Takoma Intermediate (now Principal of Richard Montgomery H.S.), "Race didn't matter. He cared about

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them all and got through to them all—black, white, Hispanic, Asian.”

Jordan's success also owed something to political savvy. While he eschewed electoral politics, he had a ward-heeler's command of the community resources and a pastor's knowledge of most families' needs. When he saw or heard of a troubled youngster, he'd usually seek out the parents or guardians, not to complain or criticize, but to sympathize and encourage involvement in the Club. After years of this, he developed a large network of appreciative parents who'd swear on his reliability. He also developed a huge following among the young adults whom he'd coached as youngsters, and these he called upon to fill out the ever expanding ranks of coaches at the Boys and Girls Club. Then there were the sponsors.

As his programs grew, Jordan managed to inspire interest in among many local merchants and business leaders. He knew who'd be sympathetic, and he worked to piece together the support network. Later in his life the City officials of Takoma Park came to recognize his stature within the community. He was deputized to deliver charity baskets to needy families during Thanksgiving

and Christmas. In 1971, he was made the first African American Grand Marshall of the Takoma Park Fourth of July Parade. By this time, he was widely known as the unofficial Mayor of Takoma Park.

After Jordan retired as a custodian, he'd still walk to Takoma Junior High School every day to engage the kids, ask them how the day went, talk to them about the importance of grades, and encourage them to sign up for the youth athletics programs. On warm days he'd sit outside. In bad weather, he'd come right into the intersection of the main corridors. He encouraged the students to air their problems, offered counsel or encouragement, and pulled all the strings at his disposal to help a youngster when he thought it was necessary. Ironically, he didn't gravitate to the gym. He was more interested in the kids as people than as athletes. When his diabetes flared up and prevented him from continuing his daily visits in the mid 1980s, the kids were genuinely distressed that “Mr. Lee” wasn't getting around any more, recalls former Principal Tom Gillette.

One week before he died in 1988, Jordan called Assistant Principal Downs over to his house from Takoma Intermediate. He gave Downs the house plants he'd lovingly nurtured for years. He wanted them to go to the School. Some of the plants, including a large cactus, are still at Takoma Intermediate in the

same pots that Jordan gave to Steve Downs. Lee Jordan never left his custodian's keys off at the school after he retired in 1973. Steve Downs says that was just fine because everybody wanted him to come back whenever it suited him.

Every morning now, Steve Downs

passes Lee Jordan Field on his way to work at Takoma Intermediate. “That was his field” says Downs with emphasis. He graced it with his presence for generations. He breathed life into his philosophy of community activism there.

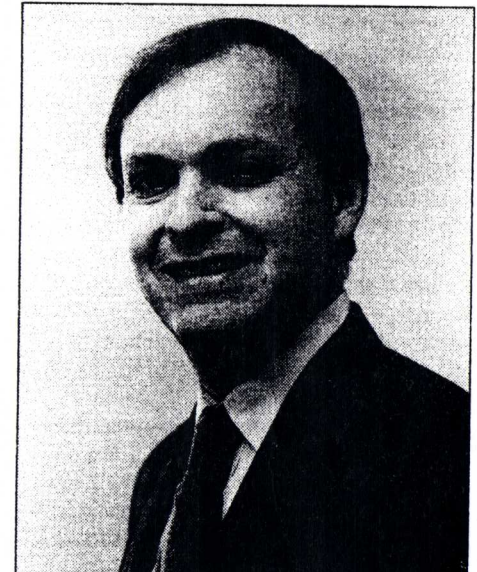
Berger Elected Vice Chair of WSSC

Voice columnist and telecommunications attorney Bob Berger has been elected to a one-year term as vice chair of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC). He will be serving with Robert Potter, who was elected chair in early June.

Berger, a senior attorney with the D.C. law firm of Swidler and Berlin, was appointed to the commission by Montgomery County Executive Neal Potter in 1993. He previously served as a Trustee of the WSSC's Employees' Retirement Fund.

Berger has also served as president of the Montgomery County Mental Health Association and the Montgomery County Commission on Aging. He is currently a board member of the Family Services Agency, Inc.

Six commissioners, three from Montgomery County and three from Prince George's County comprise the governing body of the WSSC. They are ap-



pointed to four-year terms by their county executives and are then confirmed by the county council. Each year, the chair and vice chair, who must reside in different counties, are chosen by members of the Commission.