

SPORTS

Remember when Michael Jordan was a star witness in a Charlotte trial? ESPN did

BY JIM MORRILL

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The ESPN documentary "The Last Dance" about Michael Jordan covered Jordan's time in court in Charlotte. Then, the 29-year-old was called as a defense witness in the drug and money-laundering trial of golf hustler, James "Slim" Boulter" BY STEPHANIE BUNAO

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It merited just a passing reference in a recent episode of "The Last Dance," ESPN's documentary of Michael Jordan's last title run with the Chicago Bulls.

But the day Jordan stepped off the basketball court and into federal court in Charlotte in 1992 remains one of the city's biggest courtroom spectacles in decades.

Jordan, then 29, had been called as a defense witness in the drug and money-laundering trial of James "Slim" Boulter, a 41-year-old golf hustler.



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His testimony before a packed audience that included reporters from around the country helped clear Boulter of the most serious charge. It also revealed Jordan's own penchant for high-stakes gambling, a theme of ESPN's Episode 6.

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The documentary tracks Jordan through his final season and last championship with the Bulls. The trial took place just before the start of Chicago's 1992-93 championship season, and five months after Jordan led the Dream Team to Olympic gold.

"I've handled a number of high-profile cases but never one with the intensity of the public attention to this case," attorney James Wyatt, who represented Boulter, told the Observer.

Charlotte lawyer James Wyatt, left and his client James "Slim" Boulter, right, sit in a federal courtroom in 1992. NBA star Michael Jordan became implicated with Boulter through checks from golf gambling debts totaling \$57,000. Jeff Siner JSINER@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM

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At the trial, Wyatt sat next to Boulter in front of federal Judge Robert “Maximum Bob” Potter. Next to Boulter was his red and white golf bag, a prop to remind the jury that he made his living through golf, not drug trafficking.

Jordan’s testimony lasted less than nine minutes. But his fame required stealing him into the courthouse as well as an uptown hotel. Earlier it entailed a whirlwind trip to Dallas by a Charlotte prosecutor to interview the star, far away from the media glare in Charlotte or Chicago.

“It was very tactical not to cross-examine Michael Jordan in the state of North Carolina,” Frank Whitney, then an assistant U.S. attorney and now a federal judge, says of his trip to Texas.

THE \$57,000 CHECK

Boulter was an avid golfer. He learned the game caddying at the Charlotte Country Club. He played in his first tournament in 8th grade, the same year he made his first bet on the game — a nickel. By the time of the trial, he owned a golf pro shop in Union County. He also had a spotty record.

In 1986 he’d been convicted of cocaine possession and sentenced to probation.

Four years later federal drug agents stopped him at Charlotte Douglas International Airport and found \$153,000 in cash in his golf bag and Samsonite suit bag, according to court documents. He told investigators he planned to use the money to place golf bets. Authorities, who seized the money, believed he was laundering money for drug dealers.

In 1991, investigators in Charlotte found a \$57,000 cashier’s check to Boulter from ProServ, the agency that represented Jordan. Boulter told them it was a loan from the basketball star. Jordan, who had met Boulter a few years earlier, told reporters it was a loan to help him open a driving range.

The golf bag that was prominently displayed behind James “Slim” Boulter during his federal court case in 1992 now stands on the back of a golf cart at the Dr. Charles L. Sifford Golf Course in Charlotte, NC on Thursday, May 7, 2020. Boulter beat NBA star Michael Jordan out of \$57,000 in one three-day weekend of golf in 1991. Boulter would later go to trial in a federal court where Jordan would appear as a witness in 1992. Jeff Siner

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Whitney says investigators, who had tapped a cordless phone conversation between Boulter and his banker, knew otherwise.

It turned out to be a debt Jordan owed him from a three-day outing in Hilton Head in 1991 with a group that included Boulter and New York Giants star Lawrence Taylor, Jordan’s fellow Tar Heel. Jordan owed the money for golfing wagers and a loan from Boulter during a poker game. (Betting on golf or other games of skill is not illegal in South Carolina, which bans other forms of gambling.)

While Jordan was in Hilton Head, Coach Phil Jackson and the rest of the Bulls were at the White House being feted by President George H.W. Bush for their recent championship. Jordan’s absence [was explained](#) as a long-scheduled family vacation.

‘NOW YOU KNOW’

In January 1992, Whitney flew to Dallas where the Bulls were playing the Mavericks. With two Internal Revenue Service agents, he went to interview Jordan in a hotel conference room.

Whitney, who had been at UNC law school when Jordan left Chapel Hill after three seasons, reached out to shake Jordan's hand. He told Jordan he was sorry he'd left Carolina early.

"He looked at me and smiled," Whitney recalls. Jordan, knowing the agents had seen his financial records, said, "Now you know why I left."

Then Whitney asked him about the \$57,000 check to Boulter.

"He told me ... that he did not really want his wife to know he'd lost the money playing poker," Whitney says. "He told us the truth."

With Boulter's trial approaching that fall, Wyatt wanted Jordan to testify. He believed it would help make the case that the money had nothing to do with drugs.

"There was a lot of time and effort put in to bring Mr. Jordan here as a witness," Wyatt says. "We wanted to establish two things through his testimony. First, that he had played high stakes golf matches with Slim Boulter. ... Second, we wanted to make clear that nothing illegal occurred when Mr. Boulter was with Mr. Jordan. There was no drug use."

On the morning of the trial, Jordan checked into the Dunhill hotel, entering by a rear door to avoid any crowd. He stayed until leaving for the courthouse shortly after noon.

While a limousine circled the front of the federal courthouse to distract the media, Jordan slipped into a side door with his father and a friend at his side.

THE WHEATIES BOX

As with any witness, Wyatt asked Jordan to state his full name. Then, knowing a good part of the world was watching, he sought to break the ice.

"Without going into a lot of detail in your background," Wyatt went on, "would it be fair to say you're the fellow on the Wheaties box?"

Had he played with Boulter? Yes. For what kind of stakes? Up to \$1,000. What was the \$57,000 for? Debts from golf and loans during poker games. Had Boulter used drugs in his presence or offered him any? No.

Charlotte lawyer James Wyatt, right, represented James "Slim" Boulter in a federal case in Charlotte, NC in 1992. NBA star Michael Jordan became implicated with Boulter through checks from golf gambling debts totaling \$57,000. Jeff Siner *JSINER@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM*

Then it was Whitney's turn.

What was the first time he had heard the \$57,000 described as a loan?

"It was my reaction to the media asking me," Jordan replied. "(A)nd I said a loan strictly for the — to save the embarrassment or pain from people knowing that it was gambling."

His testimony done, Jordan left the courtroom. Once he was gone, the media poured out as well.

"He was by far the most impressive witness I had ever seen on the witness stand at that point in my career, even though he only testified for a few minutes," Wyatt said.

NO REGRETS

These days, Jordan owns the Charlotte Hornets. He has an office in the Spectrum Center, a few blocks from the courthouse where he testified.

Bouler is back in Charlotte too, working as a delivery service courier and playing golf whenever he can at the west side Charles L. Sifford Golf Course. Bouler once told a reporter it was the club he used to sneak into as a kid because blacks weren't allowed.

James "Slim" Bouler flashes the money from his pocket on Thursday, May 7, 2020 at the Dr. Charles L. Sifford Golf Course in Charlotte, NC. Bouler beat NBA star Michael Jordan out of \$57,000 in one three-day weekend of golf in 1991. Bouler would later go to trial in a federal court where Jordan would appear as a witness in 1992. Jeff Siner
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At the trial, he was convicted of money laundering. But he was acquitted of the more severe drug charges, despite the testimony of 10 witnesses. As it was, he went on to spend eight years in prison, a sentence doubled because of his previous record.

"Slim would still be in jail today if he had been convicted of those (other) charges," says Wyatt, now a high-profile criminal defense attorney.

Now 69, Bouler says he didn't watch "The Last Dance" episode. He's written a book — "I Bet on Air and Lost It All" — but has no publisher yet.

Bouler says he has no regrets about the past.

"That was part of life," he says. "We live, we learn, and we keeping moving. You can't sit back and dwell on the past. Life don't wait on nobody."

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Charlotte lawyer James Wyatt, right, represented James "Slim" Bouler in a federal case in Charlotte in 1992. NBA star Michael Jordan became a witness because of a \$57,000 check he wrote to Bouler to cover gambling debts.

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Jim Morrill, who grew up near Chicago, covers state and local politics. He's worked at the Observer since 1981 and taught courses on North Carolina politics at UNC Charlotte and Davidson College.

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