

THE OCEAN

by Christopher D. Seifert

Jordan Spitznoggle loved the ocean. At least, he *thought* he loved the ocean. Jordan had never actually been to the ocean, but he was certain it was a marvelous place.

Whenever Jordan returned home from a long, hard day at Kickapoo Elementary School, he gave his mother a kiss, dropped his backpack in his bedroom, and tucked Max, his long-time Teddy Bear and confidant, under his arm.

Then Jordan set off for the deck behind the house and was instantly transformed into Captain Jordan Three-Beard, the most feared pirate to sail the 87 Seas.

Max was his first mate.

High atop the poop deck of the good ship Jolly Rancher, Captain Jordan Three-Beard surveyed the ocean. Silvery fish darted through the glittery waves and seagulls bounced across the deep blue sky. Captain Three-Beard could practically taste the salty, salty sea.

While other boys played football or marbles, Captain Three-Beard chased mermaids and treasure or swashbuckled with swashbucklers.

“Look alive there!” he said to Max.

One afternoon, Bo Bohoravich, Captain Three-Beard's classmate at Kickapoo Elementary School and neighbor from across the street, knocked on the Spitznoggles' front door. Mrs. Spitznoggle answered.

"Can Jordan play?" Bo asked.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Spitznoggle said, "but Captain Three-Beard is out to sea."

"Figures," Bo bemoaned. He turned and glumly dribbled his basketball – *thump, thump, thump* – down the walkway, across the street, and back to his own house.

"I've been thinking," Mrs. Spitznoggle said at dinnertime that evening.

"Watch out!" Mr. Spitznoggle exclaimed.

"I believe," Mrs. Spitznoggle continued, "that it is time for Captain Three-Beard to broaden his horizons. Jordan, you should invite Bo Bohoravich over to play marbles."

"The ocean is a lonely place," Jordan replied, which was his way of telling his mother he did not like her suggestion. Besides, he thought, the line where ocean meets sky is quite broad enough.

The next day at school, all of the students, including Jordan Spitznoggle and Bo Bohoravich, were invited to the gymnasium where a large, red-faced man was waiting.

"Hello," said the red-faced man to the students. "My name is Commissioner Jim Gordon from the Kickapoo Athletic Association. Do you know why I am here, boys and girls? I did not think so," Commissioner Gordon said before any of the students could respond to his question.

"I am here to teach you about the benefits of exercise, the joy of sportsmanship, and the thrill of victory. Mostly, I am here to solicit entry fees for the Kickapoo Youth Basketball League."

Jordan's classmates clapped and cheered. They whooped and hollered.

Jordan did not understand his classmates' enthusiasm, but he wanted to. That is why he summoned a fake smile and clapped and cheered as well.

That night at dinner, Jordan cleared his throat.

"Mom?" he said.

"Yes, dear," his mother answered.

"I've decided," he said, "it is time for me to broaden my horizons. I would like to join the Kickapoo Youth Basketball League."

"That's wonderful," his mother said with eyebrows raised.

"That's my boy," his father said before writing Jordan a check to cover his league entry fee.

The day of the first practice soon arrived. Jordan's father parked the family car in front of the Kickapoo Community Building.

"Good luck," said Jordan's mother.

"Knock 'em dead," said Jordan's father.

Jordan climbed out of the car, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jean shorts, and walked through the front doors of the Kickapoo Community Building, not certain what to expect.

The Kickapoo Community Building was enormous with tall windows to the outside. Voices and sneaker sounds echoed back and forth between the walls.

At the center of the gym, nine boys, including Bo Bohoravich, stood crowded around Commissioner Jim Gordon, who wore a whistle about his neck and clutched a clipboard in his hand.

Commissioner Gordon's red face grew redder and he glared at Jordan. "*You*," he said to Jordan, "must be young Mr. Spitznoggle."

“Yes,” Jordan peeped while looking down at his long legs and knobby knees and high-top shoes.

“You are tall,” Commissioner Gordon observed. “But you are also late. I am your coach, and no one belonging to my team arrives late to practice. Now,” Coach Gordon continued, “as I was saying before I was interrupted by young Mr. Spitznogle, I am a highly skilled athletic trainer. Listen to me, and I will teach you the most thrilling aspect of athletic competition: Imposing the agony of defeat on others at all costs. So, with that in mind, the time has arrived for lay-up drills.”

Jordan did not know what a lay-up was. Likewise, he did not know the meaning of many other terms such as jump shot, free throw, backboard, bounce pass, or crossover dribble.

Needless to say, practice did not go well for Jordan. ... And Coach Gordon’s harsh voice echoed throughout the Kickapoo Community Building.

At the end of practice, the team gathered at midcourt. “The first game is Saturday at 9 a.m.,” Coach Gordon said as he handed out ten red jerseys. “But before then we must choose a name for our team.”

“We should be the Pirates!” Jordan suggested excitedly, but his teammates ignored him. Instead, they decided to call themselves the Bug Eaters.

On the morning of the big game, Jordan sat on the bench and watched his teammates compete against a squad with black jerseys that called themselves the Killer Whales. (‘What a *great* name,’ Jordan thought to himself.)

The two teams took turns scoring. Bo Bohoravich made a three-pointer. The Killer Whales’ Luke Lewandowski made two free throws.

At halftime, the score was tied at 12 to 12. “This is horrible!” Coach Gordon yelled.

“We must not lose!”

The second half started, but Jordan remained on the bench. With two minutes left in the game and the score still tied, one of the referees marched up to Coach Gordon.

“This young man has not yet played,” the referee said, motioning to Jordan.

“Is that so?” Coach Gordon feigned surprise.

“Yes,” the referee said, “and you know the rules.” Coach Gordon scowled and looked down the bench.

“Spitznoggle!” he barked. “You’re in for Furtwangler!”

Jordan smiled and jumped up. His parents cheered from the bleachers behind him.

Jordan raced onto the floor.

“No!” Coach Gordon shouted. “You must check in at the scorers’ table first!”

Jordan checked in and play resumed. Bo Bohoravich made another three-pointer. The Killer Whales scored too. The clock ticked down. 10 ... 9 ... 8 ... Jordan noticed his shoelaces were untied. ... 7 ... 6 ... He bent over and reached for the laces. ... 5 ... 4 ... The ball rolled between Jordan’s legs as he stood just beneath the basket. ... 3 ... 2 ... “Pick it up, pick it up!” Coach Gordon screamed. ... 1 ... The ball rolled right on out of bounds as the final horn sounded.

“Bug Eaters 25, Killer Whales 25,” the scoreboard read.

“We tied! We tied!” Jordan cried while jumping up and down. He wondered why the teams were lining up again at midcourt if the game was over.

“Spitznoggle!” Coach Gordon hissed. “Off the court. Overtime is about to start. Do you want us to get a technical?”

During the overtime period, Jordan stayed on the bench. Bo Bohoravich missed all of his shots. The Killer Whales made all of theirs and later toted Luke Lewandowski off the court when they won the game. Coach Gordon broke a clipboard over his knee.

“Next week’s practice starts early,” he said. He looked at Jordan. “And you all had better arrive on time.”

The next practice did start early, and Jordan did *not* arrive late. But even so the Bug Eaters lost the following game too. And the next one. And the next one after that. And so on and so forth.

Jordan played very little, and when he did, Coach Gordon’s face was even redder than usual.

One day, Mr. Spitznoggle opened the back door of the Spitznoggle home to find his son standing on the deck of the good ship Jolly Rancher with Max tucked under his arm.

“Permission to come aboard?” Mr. Spitznoggle asked.

“Permission granted,” Jordan muttered, without taking his eyes off the horizon. Mr. Spitznoggle stepped onto the deck.

“Would you and mom be upset,” Jordan asked his father after a few moments had passed, “if I stopped playing basketball? I don’t think Coach Gordon would mind. Really.”

“How many games are left?” Mr. Spitznoggle asked.

“One,” Jordan answered. Mr. Spitznoggle thought about this.

Finally, he said, “You don’t have to play basketball next year if you don’t want to, but right now why don’t you finish what you started, huh?” Jordan nodded and watched the ocean waves crest and fall.

The season's final practice soon arrived. The team ran lay-up drills for the final time. Then Coach Gordon shouted "Spitznoggle!" and Jordan trudged toward his coach without taking his eyes off the gym floor.

"Basketball is a game of skill," Coach Gordon said to Jordan as the rest of the team continued with lay-up drills. "You have no skill. You are hopeless. But I – I am magnanimous. Do you know what magnanimous means?" Jordan shook his head to indicate he did not. "Magnanimous," Coach Gordon said, "means I am kind beyond all understanding. It means I visit the fatherless and widows, the sick and the afflicted. It means I teach basketball to hopeless children like you."

And then Coach Gordon did something that in a million years Jordan would not have expected: He taught young Mr. Spitznoggle the proper technique for shooting a basketball.

"Balance the ball on your fingertips like so," Coach Gordon said while demonstrating. "Raise your arm like an elevator. Use your off hand to aim, and flick your wrist." The basketball flicked away from Coach Gordon's fingertips and clanged loudly against the rim. Now you try," Coach Gordon said as he ushered Jordan to the free throw line. "You must look at the basket and think, 'The basket is as wide and as broad and as deep as the ocean.'"

Jordan worked by himself the rest of the practice. He did not make a single basket. Oftentimes, he missed the hoop altogether, but he repeated to himself over and over again, "The ocean ... the ocean ..."

The next day after school, Jordan nailed a sign to the deck behind the house. "Captain Three-Beard," the sign said, "is away on shore leave. Sincerest apologies for any inconvenience this may cause."

Then Jordan walked across the street to Bo Bohoravich's house. He knocked on the front door and waited until Bo's mother answered. She looked surprised to see him.

"May Bo come out to play?" Jordan asked.

"I'm sorry," Bo's mother said, "but Bo is not feeling well. Perhaps another day." Jordan kicked at the pavement. "Is there something else I can do for you?" Bo's mother asked him.

"I was just wondering," Jordan said, "if I might borrow a basketball and shoot hoops in your driveway."

Again, Mrs. Bohoravich looked surprised, but then she said, "Go right ahead."

"Thanks!" Jordan said and bounded away. He found Bo's basketball in the flower bed in front of the house.

Then he took up a spot at the end of the Bohoravich's driveway and did just as Coach Gordon had taught him: Raise, aim, *flick*—raise, aim, *flick*—raise, aim, *flick*.

Jordan practiced until late into the evening when the only light came from streetlamps. "Like the ocean," he whispered to himself over and over again, "like the ocean ..."

Jordan practiced in the Bohoravich's driveway every night that week while the good ship Jolly Rancher stayed anchored in the Spitznoggle's back yard.

The day of the final game soon arrived. The Bug Eaters – minus Bo Bohoravich, who was still at home with the flu – were matched against the unbeaten Rattlesnakes.

Jordan and the Bug Eaters huddled up before tipoff, and Coach Gordon offered his final pregame pep talk: "There will be no postseason for us," he said. "We are going to lose this morning, but please, please, please do your best to minimize the embarrassment. Break."

The starters took the floor, and the game began. Jordan remained on the bench, and the Bug Eaters trailed 30-15 at the half.

During halftime, one of the referees approached Coach Gordon. “Let the Spitznoggle kid play the whole second half,” the referee told Coach Gordon.

“Are you kidding?” Coach Gordon exclaimed. “But the rules say—”

“I don’t care what the rules say,” the referee interrupted. “It’s the last game of the year. You aren’t going to win anyway, so let the kid play.”

Coach Gordon threw up his hands. “Spitznoggle!” he cried. “You’re in for the second half.” Jordan beamed.

“Like the ocean!” he said.

“What?” Coach Gordon asked.

“Nothing,” Jordan said with a smile.

Five minutes into the second half, a Bug Eaters shot rimmed away and the ball bounced out near the free throw line where Jordan was standing. Jordan licked his lips and grasped the ball. Coach Gordon groaned and covered his eyes.

“Like the ocean,” Jordan said.

The ball flew away from Jordan’s fingers, arced high through the Kickapoo Community Building, and swished through the net. The crowd went wild.

Later, the ball came to Jordan as he stood outside the three-point line.

“Like the ocean,” Jordan repeated, and the ball went up, came down, rattled in the cylinder, and slipped through the net.

After Jordan made two more shots, his astonished teammates decided to feed the hot hand. Pass after pass came Jordan’s way and shot after shot swished through the net.

Soon, the Rattlesnakes were throwing double- and triple-teams at Jordan, but it didn't matter. Jordan single-handedly erased the Rattlesnakes' lead. He made hook shots and jump shots and twirling no-look shots. Jordan Spitznoggle could not miss.

With thirty seconds left in the game, the score was tied, and the Rattlesnakes had the ball. The Rattlesnakes passed the ball around the three-point line as the seconds ticked away. Finally, the Rattlesnakes' Dale Demitrov fired a shot. The ball rolled off the rim and landed in Jordan's hands.

Jordan took one dribble up the court, then two.

"Shoot! *Shoot!*" Coach Gordon shrieked from the bench. So, Jordan heaved the ball from the opposite free throw line and watched the orange sphere sail up near the rafters before it came down, hit the front of the rim, bounced high, and fell straight through the cylinder just as the horn sounded.

Jordan's teammates rushed the court and carried him on their shoulders. Coach Gordon vacillated between tears and hysterical laughter.

In the commotion, someone heard him say, "After all, I *am* a highly skilled athletic trainer."

Later, Jordan's dad gave him a high five, and his parents took him out for ice cream.

The next day, Jordan's mother found him on the deck behind the house.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain Three-Beard?"

"Granted," Jordan said.

"Your father and I have decided we should take a family vacation this summer," Mrs. Spitznoggle said.

“That’s great,” Jordan said as he scanned the distant horizon. “Where to?” Mrs. Spitznoggle only smiled.

Five months later, Captain Jordan Three-Beard found himself standing on the deck of a giant cruise ship. His mother was at his right, his father on his left. Max was under one arm, his basketball under the other.

Jordan leaned against the railing, and the wind whipped through his hair.

“Water as far as the eye can see,” Mrs. Spitznoggle observed. “Isn’t it marvelous?”

Jordan didn’t respond, but he did hand Max to his mother. Then he stepped away from the railing, turned around, closed his eyes, and chucked the basketball up behind him and over his head. The orange globe was lost somewhere in the sun before it plummeted down. And do you know what happened?

It went in.