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An interview with:

MAGIC JOHNSON LARRY BIRD

THE MODERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, this is the 30th anniversary of the 1979 national championship game which pitted Michigan State and Indiana State. Tonight we have two gentlemen here who really need no introduction. But from Lansing, Michigan and Michigan State, Magic Johnson, and from French Lick, Indiana, and Indiana State, Larry Bird.

If you would relate maybe a memory or two from that championship game as an opening statement, then we'll open it up for questions.

MAGIC JOHNSON: Well, for me, it just was getting a chance to beat Penn in the first game, then sitting there for a minute watching Larry and Indiana State play DePaul, watching him shoot and shoot and shoot. I think he only missed one or two shots the whole game.

We went back to the hotel. We was like, Oh, my goodness, what are we gonna do to contain Larry Bird? I had seen him in the WIT tournament the summer before that. Both of us were on the bench, as a matter of fact. But to see him out there scoring, I think it was 40 points in that game, we were really concerned, very concerned, about Larry. We knew that we couldn't stop him. But how could we contain not him, but the other guys to make sure we could put ourselves in a position to win.

We had never seen a player like Larry Bird, and there's never been a player since Larry Bird that could go inside, outside, make the pass, get the rebound, make the steal, make the block,

take it the length of the court himself and make a play. He's still the most amazing player that's played and the most unique player that's played at the same time.

When we finally got a chance to play, no pun intended, it was magical. Larry was College Player of the Year. I think what got them was two very good players against one very good player, because I had Greg Kelser with me. I think that's what really got us over the hump.

LARRY BIRD: Well, 30 years has been a long time. I try to forget the losses, but maybe I can remember some of it.

I can remember early in the year, Magic was playing against the Russians, Michigan State was playing against the Russians, I was fortunate enough to play that game. After seeing them perform, I thought, That's the best team in college basketball, never knowing we would have an opportunity to play them in the finals. Once we got to the finals, we went through the tournament, we played Arkansas, it was a two-point game, DePaul, it was a two-point game. After the DePaul game, I remember back at the hotel, I had some time by myself. I was thinking, If I don't score 40 points Monday night, we don't have a chance to win. I really believed that at the time.

We played against a lot of good players, a lot of good teams. I seen every defense that you could possibly throw at someone throughout one year. But I knew that this game was going to be different in the fact that they were taller, they were quicker, they had a lot of length. Magic controlled the tempo.

Like Earvin said earlier, we played together on an All-Star team. I got a little taste of it then. So going into that game, I knew if I didn't perform at my highest level, we didn't have a chance to win the ballgame.

They controlled the game. I don't remember a lot. I never watched it. I think we missed a lot of free throws during that game, and

my shot was off. They had me covered pretty well. They had a guy in front of me, a guy behind me. When I put it on the floor, somebody else was coming. I didn't make the plays I normally make, and we didn't shoot the ball at a high percentage. We were in a world of hurt there for a long time during that game.

But to believe that people are still talking about it 30 years later, I always tell anyone, If Indiana State would have won that game, nobody would have brought it up. Yet here we are (laughter).

It was fun. I think that year our team was picked like fourth in our conference. We overcame some early obstacles to end up 33-0, going to the championship game undefeated. As I look back on it now, that's pretty special, even though we wasn't good enough to win the championship.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Larry, you say you've never watched that game.

LARRY BIRD: Why? I mean, truthfully I can remember a lot of the games I played in, especially that one. I mean, just like last night, I was going through the channels to find the show I was going to watch. I seen Bobby Heaton talking about 30 years ago. I watched it for a second, then they flipped to the game, and I turned the channel real quick. Them were not good memories for me.

My goal once we got in the tournament was obviously to win it and get as far as we possibly could. I had no clue we could get to the final game. But once I got a taste of it, I wanted to win that game, not for myself, not personal glory, but for Indiana State, which never had an opportunity or, probably never will again, I hope so, and for the City of Terre Haute that treated me so good when I was there.

Down to the last four or five minutes, knowing I wasn't able to do that, it wasn't much fun. So I don't like the memories of it. Obviously I'm honored to be able to play in a game like that, but I just never watched it. I don't know.

Q. Earvin, have you watched it?

MAGIC JOHNSON: I watched it enough for him and I (laughter).

LARRY BIRD: Every day.

MAGIC JOHNSON: Every day, that's right.

LARRY BIRD: Especially if he knows he's gonna be with me.

MAGIC JOHNSON: I just watched it, what, Saturday or Sunday. It was just on ESPN, I think it was. So I was able to enjoy it.

You know, Larry is so competitive, just like I am. I mean, if he had won it, trust me, I wouldn't have watched it either. Just like I don't watch '84, when the Celtics beat us.

LARRY BIRD: Or '85 or '87 (laughter). I don't remember them years for some reason.

Q. America seems to have such a love affair with you and Larry's rivalry. Why do you think that is? What is it about you two guys that America can't get enough of?

MAGIC JOHNSON: Well, because we played the game the right way. We didn't play it for ourselves. We played it for our team. We were two unique guys being over 6'8", being able to handle the ball, being able to score inside, outside, being able to make the right pass to our teammates. Because we really didn't care about scoring. We really cared about winning the game. That was the most important thing. And we would do anything to win.

And then you have one player black, one player white, one player smile, one guy who don't - except right now (laughter). You know, it was one player end up with the Celtics, one with the Lakers. I think it was just special. So I think it was special for both of us. And we were just -- you know what, our will to win and competitive nature was so high, I think that was the key.

But people will tell you right now, we just played the game the right way, the way basketball should be played.

Q. Earvin, do you know if you're going to have a pregame address with the Spartans? If so, what do you plan to say?

MAGIC JOHNSON: No, I haven't really gone into the locker room in the tournament. I just been able to enjoy the games. I think that Coach Izzo has done an amazing job of preparing the team. Michigan State knows they up against it. They're playing, I think, the best team in basketball, when you look at it talent-wise. North Carolina is incredible. Roy Williams has done an incredible job.

So they're ready. Both teams will be ready. There's nothing that I have to say. This is

the moment that they've been waiting for. The great thing about tonight is that Larry Bird and I get to really sit back and watch these young student-athletes do their thing. I'm just going to sit back and enjoy this moment. Win or lose, they're my heroes. It doesn't matter what happens. Of course, I want them to win in the worst way. But they been just amazing.

You know what, this has been a great story. Michigan State has been a great story for the NCAA. This is what the tournament is all about. When you think of every time they've been the underdog and every time they've been able to win the game. To see 72,000 in this stadium Saturday was just truly amazing for me, as a former Spartan, but also just a former athlete. Just amazing.

So I'm not gonna say anything, I'm just gonna watch. Hopefully they can do it one more time.

Q. Magic, when you left school in '79, did you imagine that 30 years later you'd be back here in the stands watching MSU play for a national title and what does that mean to you?

MAGIC JOHNSON: Oh, wow. You know, you can't even imagine -- I mean, you can't dream up nothing like this. I mean, you can't. First of all, I want to thank the NCAA for bringing the Final Four to Detroit. Then thank Michigan State for making it all the way to the finals. I mean, and then thank the NCAA again for honoring Larry and I 30 years later. I mean, what a blessing. You can't draw this up.

I mean, Larry and I were coming anyway, right? And then Michigan State goes all the way. Oh, man. I'm like a little kid. So this is the best moment for me. To be with Larry, one of my best friends. To be with Michigan State. This is just great.

And then also, too, to have North Carolina here. I mean, 'cause, you know, we got Michael. I been getting texts from all the alumni. So Mitch Kupchak, our president, general manager, he called me. Kenny Smith, he bet me a dinner. So, you know, everybody's calling me. So it's gonna be a fun game to watch and I'm looking forward to it.

Q. We've watched your relationship develop over the years. It's been moving to watch it. You've meant so much to each other. Magic wore the Celtic jersey when your number

was retired. You were very emotional when Magic had his health problems. Can you talk about what you mean to each other?

MAGIC JOHNSON: I'll say one word and then he can take it over. There would be no Magic without Larry Bird.

LARRY BIRD: Playing each other throughout college and through our professional careers, it was the ultimate experience for me because I finally found somebody who thought and played the game the way I thought it should be played.

Going through all the competition and playing the hard-fought series and the games to me was the best that it could possibly be. You know, I never thought coming out of French Lick, Indiana, that I'd even go to college, let alone play basketball for money. So if you put all that in perspective, then be able to compete at the highest level against a guy who you think is better than you, but you maybe have the chance to beat him on a given day, to me, that's the ultimate. You know how guys are when they're young, they like to find the best games? Well, I lived the best games because I played against the best competition, and obviously Earvin was a key factor on all those teams.

It's been nothing but a great experience for me. I feel honored and blessed to be able to be in the situation. I wish everybody could experience that. Everybody is sitting back. You never know until you lace 'em up how you're going a play. You never now until you step out there if that jumper is going to fall or not.

We can talk about after, I felt it all night, but you never knew. If the shot didn't go, what can you do to help your team win a game? And I think we both understood that.

Q. 30 years is a long time. I'm sure in some ways it feels like it's gone by quickly. There were days when you were those skinny guys out there. What would you say to these fellas about savoring this moment?

MAGIC JOHNSON: You can't right now. They won't understand until two, three years, four, five years from now, what just happened. Whoever wins is gonna enjoy it, but they won't know what happened till later. You in the moment so much.

All this body of work that they had to do to get to this point, even next week, next year, they

won't understand. It's not until really you're gone down the line that you really understand how great this moment is and was. And then also, too, how special because very few teams, first, get to the Final Four. Then it's fewer than that that win the championship. They won't understand it till way down the line.

LARRY BIRD: First of all, you said 30 years. If I knew I was going to live this long, I would have took better care of myself. I'm a little bit like Mickey Mantle. Time flies, it gets away from you.

These young kids are playing for something very few get to play for. It's unfortunate one of them has to lose because they put so much time in it. I know a guy like Tyler Hansbrough came back. You never see many seniors graduated come back for one reason, and that's to win a championship. That says a lot.

But tonight there's gonna be a loser and there's gonna be a winner. I would just tell them to smell the roses. While you're here, enjoy it. When it comes time to play, play your heart out. Hopefully the shots will go in for you. But if they don't, remember it. Somebody is going to tend to bring it up to you the next 30, 40 years.

MAGIC JOHNSON: And you the only two teams standing. That's special in itself. Everybody's watching you. Like Larry and I, everybody was watching Indiana State and Michigan State. That says it all right there.

Q. Earvin, is there any similarity from the '79 team to this year's Michigan State team? Larry, did you believe in your wildest dreams how big college basketball is right now?

MAGIC JOHNSON: The only, I think, key ingredient that I think is similar is that they both teams focused in on our defense. But we were different than this team. We were long. We were very athletic. There was a 6'9" guy controlling the action.

This team is deeper than our team. This team had better defensive guards than our team. They're probably overall -- they might be better than us defensively. They can rotate a lot of guys. They can put ball pressure on. We couldn't do that. And they're physical. We were not a physical team. They are much more physical than we were.

But make no mistake about it, if they tried to line up against us, we would knock 'em out, trust me (smiling).

But I love this team. Coach Izzo is amazing. Actually, I think the two best college coaches, throw in Coach K, the top three, two of them are coaching in the game right now, Coach Roy Williams and Coach Izzo, with no doubt.

LARRY BIRD: When they took the field from 32 to 64, I think that caught everybody's attention. Get more excitement about the college campuses, throughout the states. But, you know, there's a lot of great teams out there. I can't say the coaching is better now than it was back then. But you read about 'em, you hear about 'em more. Just the excitement of the college tournament is just above and beyond anything I could ever have imagined.

Q. Michael Jordan was inducted into the Hall of Fame. He said he wished it would have come 20 years later. This was like the official close of basketball for him. Can both you guys talk about that moment when you realized you can't get on the court any more. It basically came for him today. What is that like?

MAGIC JOHNSON: Well, it's difficult to digest. It's difficult to swallow. You think as a kid you'll be able to play this game forever. But we both want to congratulate Michael. We want to congratulate John Stockton, David Robinson, Coach Stringer. What an achievement. You know, there was somebody else.

Q. Jerry Sloan?

MAGIC JOHNSON: Oh, my man. I tell myself, I would love to play for Jerry. Jerry was tough. I loved Jerry. We want to congratulate all of them because this is an amazing class. I don't know if you'll get a class like this.

But Michael was the special guy. I remember when Larry and I were on the Olympic, and we were up in that room. Remember this?

LARRY BIRD: Yeah.

MAGIC JOHNSON: And we officially had to pass the torch. He said, You guys used to be great, it used to be your league, now it's my league (laughter). Remember that?

Boy, oh, boy, did he take it and go with it, too. Just the best we've ever seen.

So we are blessed, Larry more so than I, I played against him in the '91 finals, but Larry, seemed like they went against each other so much in the playoffs. But we've never seen anything like

Michael Jordan, never probably will. I always tell people, Michael was the greatest in the air that I've ever seen, and Larry Bird is the greatest that ever played on the ground, because Larry couldn't jump that high, so...

LARRY BIRD: Not like you was flying through the air either (laughter). Trip over the painted lines.

MAGIC JOHNSON: Exactly.

So we tip our hat to him, to Michael, and say congratulations.

LARRY BIRD: John also. John was one of the smartest players I ever played against. I was telling Earvin earlier, if you made one small error on a pick-and-roll, you paid for it every time. And David Robinson, we were fortunate enough to play against David, long and athletic down the court, do a lot of things. And Jerry Sloan, what can you say as a coach? Go down in history as one of the greatest ever. We were just talking about, he never won a Coach of the Year Award. He don't care. He just wants his team to play to perfection every night. Just one of the best to ever come through our league. We've been very fortunate to be around, play against Jerry's teams and against the three players.

There was a lot of great talent in our league, from really '83, '84, up to, I guess, 2000, when we got out of it -- 1990, when we got out of it. There's a lot great talent in it now, and there was a lot of great talent in our league before we got there. You never hear of Moses Malone much any more, never much about the Boston Strangler, Andrew Toney, Dr. J was supposedly on his way out, was going to retire. We come into the league, and it rejuvenated him. I had to fight against him in the Eastern Conference. Magic is out there playing the patsies until he got to the final. We were beat up when we got there. But, hey...

MAGIC JOHNSON: Thanks a lot, Larry (laughter).

Q. Earvin, you've won Olympic gold, high school championships, NBA championships. Is that NCAA title still at the top of your list?

MAGIC JOHNSON: Oh, yeah. You know, both of us were innocent kids back then. That's what makes the NCAA tournament, March Madness, so special. Just young kids going out there, loving the game, doing it for nothing other than their teammates, for the school that they played for, Michigan State, and the city that they grow up in, for the alumni, and so on.

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So, yeah, playing for Jud, being able to play with the teammates that I played with, was outstanding. And then, you know, Larry, though, made us all scared. And so with that in mind, we probably overprepared 'cause we had to get ready for Indiana State. We knew if we didn't play the defensive game in terms of the right defensive game, we were going to lose.

So, yeah, the NCAA championship is still the most special. Like I say, I was just a kid just enjoying the moment. Still almost 50 now, I'm going to enjoy this moment tonight with Michigan State and North Carolina.

Q. Could you reverse the gentleman's question over there and give us an idea about the smallness of it, relatively.

MAGIC JOHNSON: Ask the question again.

Q. How small the tournament was back 30 years compared to now.

MAGIC JOHNSON: Tell them what you said to me back there.

LARRY BIRD: Well, I was lying back there when I was interviewing with you.

MAGIC JOHNSON: How big it is now, how it was only four channels.

LARRY BIRD: Yeah, you know, back then the rabbit ears, you have eight channels to pick from. Now you have 400 channels to pick from. So it's a little different. The ratings is a little different now than they were back then, how they calculated them. Going from 32 teams to 64 opened up the league. There's no question about that. Just more excitement.

You know, I thought that even in my junior year we had a better all around basketball club. If we was able to have 64 teams, we could have made a run my junior year. Being so small, you really had to win your conference tournament and you had to win the best record in your conference to even have an opportunity to get in it.

I know we were thinking that we were picked fourth in our conference. I didn't know how we was ever going to make it. Because I believed that stuff until we started playing. Once we started playing, I realized we might have an opportunity to get in the NCAA tournament.

The growth of it is just unbelievable. I mean, I always tell everybody, I watched the NAAs, I watch Elvin Hayes play against Lew

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Alcindor at the Houston Astrodome. I seen that game when I was a kid. I seen Pete Maravich, I seen Dan Issel, Jerry Sloan play at the University of Evansville. I can't say that me and Magic started college basketball because I seen all the great ones before me and I idolized them.

But it's just like when I watched it. I mean, I watched these guys play. When you step out on a court, you're going to compete against them for the first time, what a rush. I mean, I remember the first time I played against George McInnis. I knew George a little bit, but I didn't compete against him. George was on his way down. I had a great game. I played really well against him. After the game I said, George, you're not as good as I thought you were.

I was just a punk kid. He could have broke me in half. He started explaining, This is my last year in the league, I'm going to do this, that.

I said, Okay.

Just to be out there with these guys, like I tell people now, when I was out there at the end, and my back was hurting, I bet these little young guys running around here saying, It's all hype, Bird at nothing (laughter).

MAGIC JOHNSON: It was two magazines back then. It was Street & Smith and Sports Illustrated. As a basketball player, you wanted to get in hopefully one day Street & Smith back then, and hopefully one day you could get in Sports Illustrated, in the little section, in the little high school section way in the back that had your little picture in there.

Look how much has changed, to Larry's point. Now you can either see any basketball team in America or you can get on your computer or you can listen to them on the radio. It's amazing now. I didn't get on national TV until really my freshman year when we got to the tournament. And then the next year, sophomore year, we were able to get on because of USA. We were on against Russia on that one. Of course, we played Kansas on national TV during the regular season.

But now, they got many national games. You got so many networks playing NCAA basketball, which is great. And then, man, they could play regional games in domes now. We never saw that, I mean, when we were playing.

So it's really grown and it's great. It's a grand spectacular thing. You got pools in the office. I know my office, everybody couldn't wait to get their pools started to see who would win. So it's great.

This NCAA tournament is fantastic. And I want to tell them, Don't change nothing. Don't change a thing, 'cause it's the best. It's a beautiful game, beautiful tournament.

Q. What do you think of this facility, the setup they have, these kids playing in front of 72,000 people tonight?

MAGIC JOHNSON: Great setup. I was really curious to see how it was going to play. It's played very, very well. I want to thank the City of Detroit. I want to thank the people of Michigan. They've come out. They supported this. They put on a spectacular event for everybody. Tonight will be special to see another 72,000 hopefully in there watching the two best teams in college basketball go at each other to see who's gonna be the national champion.

Q. We know in China both of you, because you are NBA superstars. Little people know your life at college. If both of you could introduce the NCAA to China or to other countries all over the world, what would you say?

MAGIC JOHNSON: I would say that the best players that you know, back when we played, so I would say the best player that we know right now who just went into the Hall of Fame, Michael Jordan, was the best player in college at that time, and turned out to be the best player in the NBA.

David Robinson at his time was the best college player, and then he turned out to be one of the best pros.

College prepares you for the NBA or for life. Larry Bird was the best college player when we both were in college at that time. Unfortunately -- I should say fortunately, back then guys went to college longer when we were in school. I wished they were able to do that now, too. Unfortunately, we had that rule that they could come out. They need to push it back and have them stay two years at least because student-athletes, they mature better, not only just basketball players, but they mature as young men, too, and they need a couple years in college to do that.

Then in the NBA, we would get a better product if they did that. There's not too many Kobes and LeBrons. For every Kobe and LeBron that come out as a young man, we have five or six or 10 of them that fail. I would say for you in

China, the best players that you know have gone through the college system. It's the most exciting game that we have. Then we take it to another level once we get out of college to go into the NBA. Then you get to display your skills on a bigger stage and a higher level.

LARRY BIRD: I agree with you (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, it's a pleasure.

LARRY BIRD: Thank you very much.

MAGIC JOHNSON: Thank you.

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