

I Am Not a Role Model



CHARLES BARKLEY

One of the greatest players in the history of the National Basketball Association, Charles Barkley is one of only four players to have compiled over 20,000 points, 10,000 rebounds, and 4,000 assists. Barkley, who was voted the NBA's Most Valuable Player in 1993 and elected to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2006, was drafted by the Philadelphia 76ers in 1984, played for the Phoenix Suns from 1992 to 1996, and concluded his career with the Houston Rockets, retiring at the end of the 2000 season because of a knee injury. Throughout his career, the undersized power forward (only 6 feet 4 inches although he was listed as 6 feet and 6 inches) outsmarted and outmaneuvered the giants in the game, but he may be even better known today for his controversial actions and comments than for his skill. The following essay, which was published in Barkley's straightforward autobiography *I May Be Wrong But I Doubt It*, deals with the relative qualities of fame and merit in celebrities and role models that was discussed by Cowen in the previous essay.

BEFORE YOU READ

- **THINK** about the idea of role models, especially of celebrities as role models. Are the best role models people you know, or can people you read about or see on the media also become effective role models? Explain your opinion.
- **EXAMINE** the title "I Am Not a Role Model." In 1993 Barkley made a controversial Nike commercial on this theme, stating that he wasn't "paid" to be a role model and that parents themselves should be role models to their kids. (If you do not remember this commercial, you can view it on YouTube.)
- **WRITE** a journal entry in which you explain why you believe celebrities can, or cannot be, good role models for young people. Be sure to include specific examples.

Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2009.

Interactions: A Thematic Reader

7th ed.

Eds. Ann Moseley and Jeanette Harris

AS YOU READ

Underline passages in which Barkley explains why he is not a role model for most young people as well as the circumstances under which he believes he can be a role model.



Nike didn't come to me with the idea to do a commercial about role models—I went to Nike with that idea. I talked to my friend the Nike executive Howard White about it, called him after thinking about it for a while, and said, “Howard, people have this role model thing completely screwed up. Is a role model just a celebrity that parents turn their kids over to? Damn, can't we do better than that? Is the best we can do for kids pointing them to celebrities they have no real chance of ever knowing?” I just thought we as a society need to do better in that area. So I asked, and Nike said, cool. And I thought it turned out great.

Remember, the main theme was “I am not a role model.”

And for that, I got ripped. I'd been criticized before, of course, for having my own take on social issues. But the first time I got hit really hard was for taking that stance. There were some columnists who defended me, but mostly I got killed. I'm okay with it, though, because nobody in all this time has been able to convince me that it's wrong to tell kids to listen to their parents and not a basketball player they've never met. How crazy is it to get slammed for saying, “Listen to your parents, listen to your teachers, listen to the responsible adults in your neighborhood or people who have done something with their lives.” I know it's hard to get an entire message across in less than a minute. But I still believe the message was clear enough that I thought kids need to be able to look up to folks right there around them who can teach them hard work and right from wrong.

Celebrities can't teach 'em that from television. People are crazy. Or maybe they're just lazy, they don't want to do the hard work, and it's easier to just turn their kids over to somebody 'cause he's famous. How stupid is that? How can you make somebody your role model when you don't know the person? All they've got most of the time is a perception of somebody off in the distance that might be totally distorted . . . or it could be the person is just misunderstood. One thing I hate is that all the general public knows about an athlete or a celebrity is what they know from the media, which is often inaccurate or incomplete. I know cases where a guy is labeled a bad guy and he's really a good guy, maybe worthy of being a role model for kids he's close to. And I know of way too many instances where the guy comes off as a good guy in the media and he's not a good guy at all. And that's a huge problem. Either way, how could that person be a legitimate role model for a kid? Because he's famous? Because he's

on TV? Can he help get questions answered for you or do anything that's specific to what you need?

Television is entertainment. I love television. And in this second stage of my life it pays me well. But television is entertainment, television is celebrity. And with so few people to emulate in their neighborhoods, black kids started fantasizing about being athletes. And having dreams is great, but how can somebody on TV help give you any direction? That's a one-way relationship. A ballplayer you can only see on TV may inspire you to do great things in athletics, sure. You can look at sports all day and want to try and do things on a court or a field like that player. But that can't help you with your homework, or with real aspirations, or help you if you're having problems at home. How does an athlete help you if you're a terrible athlete but a decent student and you need encouragement to compete academically? 5

A role model should be among the people who can influence your direction in a real-life way. The best scenario is if they can be actually in your life. My mother and grandmother were my two biggest role models; my dad wasn't there. It was my mother and grandmother. A role model, in my way of thinking, is somebody who can help shape your life and what you believe in. And it can't be somebody on television, somebody you can't touch or go to for advice, or cuss you out when it's necessary or sit and listen to you. It may be more important to have mentors than role models anyway, maybe somebody you can talk to about stuff you may not feel comfortable talking to your parents about. It needs to be somebody who's not going to tell you exactly what you want to hear all the time. 6