

Romanelli's Remembrances

MICHAEL JORDAN, an Actor?

MICHAEL JORDAN, the basketball legend, a successful actor? Who would have thought? Well, Dan Romanelli, Warner Bros. then head of consumer products did, and the results proved him correct. Particularly, an actor who had to switch between sweaty practice shorts and in-depth conversation with a cartoon character. To make the concept even more implausible, it all happened when JORDAN was in-between careers, having retired from basketball to pursue a career in baseball.

The merger of Jordan and Romanelli was the merger of two heavyweights in their respective fields. Romanelli had founded and built Warner Bros Consumer Products into a World-Class Organization with many of the best licensing executives in the industry. Among other things, he launched the Warner Bros Studio Stores and spearheaded some of the most heralded licensing campaigns of all time, including LOONEY TUNES, SPACE JAM, BATMAN, SUPERMAN, SCOOBY DOO and HARRY POTTER. In the 23 years he was at Warner Bros., his group generated over \$100 billion at retail, worldwide. He is, quite deservedly, a member of LIMA's Licensing Hall of Fame.

This all led to the movie SPACE JAM, which opened in 2000 featuring MICHAEL JORDAN and the LOONEY TUNES characters. The movie, which was part animation and part live-action, involved a basketball game against cartoon aliens called the Monstars. Other professional basketball players,



including PATRICK EWING, MUGGSY BOGUES, and CHARLES BARKLEY, made cameo appearances.

While the movie was universally panned by the critics (although Roger Ebert called it “a happy marriage of good ideas — three films for the price of one”), fortunately, the public disagreed. It earned more than \$90 million domestically at the box office and \$230 million worldwide. From a merchandising point of view, it was a blockbuster, yielding more than a billion dollars in retail sales. That is why Romanelli was so supportive of the project. Moreover, it is still the all-time, highest-grossing basketball movie.

How did the idea of pairing a basketball superstar with cartoon characters originate? It grew out of a Nike “HARE JORDAN” ad campaign that had been developed for airing during the SUPER BOWL. Jim Riswold, the creative director at Wieden+Kennedy, conceived the idea after working on commercials that paired JORDAN with Spike Lee playing the character, MARS BLACKMON. Riswold said that Nike “wanted

to do something different for the SUPER BOWL, so I couldn't think of a greater star than BUGS BUNNY to put him with" since the character was one of his childhood favorites.

Riswold thought that the pairing was a good match, explaining, "to be honest, a lot of athletes aren't good actors because they have better things to do than be good athletes. You put someone up with them to do the talking. MARS BLACKMON and BUGS BUNNY can both talk the balls off a statue."

Warner Bros. first had to decide which version of BUGS BUNNY to use—the present-day version or the one from the 1940s where he used to blow things up with dynamite. They concluded that the older version would not be acceptable to modern tastes.

The final product, HARE JORDAN, in which BUGS BUNNY and MICHAEL JORDAN joined forces to defeat the bad guys on the court, cost about a million dollars to produce. It proved to be money well spent because it was the most talked-about advertisement from the 1992 SUPER BOWL. BUGS BUNNY perhaps best summed it up when he said at the end of the ad, "This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship," Another HARE JORDAN commercial would follow.

Perhaps an ad—even a popular one—but a JORDAN movie? Could he act???? JORDAN had turned down dozens of movie roles over the years, frequently being told that he could not act. What made this opportunity special, however, is that Warner Bros. was not intending to ask him to act—they simply wanted him to play himself.

It wasn't, however, an instant sell. Dan Romanelli got a call from JORDAN's agent who told him that Warner Bros. had turned down the opportunity to do the movie concept. Romanelli was flabbergasted, stating, "How can you not do something with MICHAEL JORDAN?" Above all else, Romanelli saw enormous licensing potential with plush toys and action figures. "I've been wrong about other things, but I felt like with Michael, you just can't go wrong. He's gold," Romanelli said.

Romanelli's excitement was not, however, universally shared by Warner Bros. management. They didn't want to "mess around" with BUGS BUNNY unless there was a good reason to do so. Romanelli won out, however, as management came to recognize that the potential dynamics between MICHAEL JORDAN and BUGS BUNNY could be fantastic.

Warner Bros. then assembled a strong team, including Joe Pytka, who had directed the HARE JORDAN ads, and Ivan Reitman, as the producer. Together, they conceived the idea of having JORDAN help the LOONEY TUNES characters in a basketball game against the MONSTARS.

Another problem surfaced. Just when things were starting to come together, JORDAN decided to retire from basketball to pursue a baseball career. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending upon how one looked at it, his baseball career did not turn out the way he had hoped. That brought Michael back into training for a basketball comeback. To support the return, Warner Bros. built a gym on the set for a not so insignificant amount. The PR and goodwill value of the investment overcame any cost, because it made him the star of the lot, drawing actors, executives, and staff for pickup games and workouts. He also brought along fellow pro and college players for competition.



Bill Murray joined the cast because of Reitman's prior experience with him. Murray would have one of the classic lines in the movie when he asked JORDAN why there wasn't any room in the NBA for a guy like him, adding, "It's 'cause I'm white, isn't it?" JORDAN responded, saying "No. Larry's [Bird] white." Murray retorted, saying, "Larry's not white. Larry's clear."

SPACE JAM was one of the first movies that adopted the concept of product placement, i.e., where consumer product companies pay a sponsorship fee to have their product appear in the movie. Among the sponsored products were GATORADE and WHEATIES. The movie score produced such megahits as R. Kelly's "I Believe I Can Fly," which won a Grammy, and Seal's "Fly Like an Eagle."

Another first for SPACE JAM was the use of Internet marketing to promote it which was in its infancy in 1995. Warner Bros. set up a website to describe how the motion picture was made. Finally, it used cutting edge computer animation to replace the animation done by hand in earlier movies.

Romanelli was quite proud of his role in convincing Warner Bros. to pursue the project. He described his efforts in doing so as one of his "proudest moments" at Warner Bros. His enthusiasm and vision were certainly borne out in the marketplace as more than \$1 billion in licensed SPACE JAM merchandise was sold. "I remember one of the international executives said he thought we were very lucky with that," Romanelli recalled. "Luck had nothing to do with it. It all had to do with MICHAEL JORDAN and the LOONEY TUNES characters, and a really fun, sweet story that resonated with fans all around the world."

Romanelli's enthusiasm wasn't necessarily shared by director Riswold, who had come up with the original partnership of JORDAN and BUGS BUNNY. He said SPACE JAM was "a marketing idea first, and a movie, maybe ninth.... [but] that's okay. It made a lot of people smile, and we all know the world could use more smiling."



SPACE JAM Sequel That Almost Didn't Happen

While SPACE JAM was a hit in 1996, it took many stops and starts and decades before it yielded a sequel to become a Hollywood “franchise.” Finally, 25 years after the SPACE JAM release, SPACE JAM 2 became a reality with LEBRON JAMES, RYAN COOGLER, and a lot of nostalgia and is scheduled for release in 2021.

The original plan was to have a traditional sequel to SPACE JAM. Warner Bros. had the original director, Joe Pytko, onboard and believed that MICHAEL JORDAN was ready to sign on as well. The plot would have been JORDAN and the LOONEY TUNES gang square off against a villain called Berserk-O played by Mel Brooks. When JORDAN refused, Warner Bros. considered other proposals, including:

- **Race Jam**, which would have pitted BUGS BUNNY against the highly popular race car driver, JEFF GORDON. Unfortunately, that movie never materialized.
- **Spy Jam** with JACKIE CHAN paired with BUGS BUNNY in a spy theme sequel. While that movie never materialized, the concept led to an unrelated movie called LOONEY TUNES: BACK IN ACTION in which JEFF GORDON from Race Jam fame had a cameo appearance.
- **Skate Jam** would have combined the LOONEY TUNES characters with skateboarder, TONY HAWK. Unfortunately, the lack of success of the Warner Bros. BACK IN ACTION movie was too much for management to overcome.
- **SPACE JAM: A New Legacy**. Four times is a charm. The above-described sequel to SPACE JAM was filmed in 2019 and scheduled for release in 2021. In addition to LEBRON JAMES and BUGS BUNNY, the movie will include a cast of the basketball elite, including ANTHONY DAVIS, DAMIAN LILLARD, KLAY THOMPSON, CHRIS PAUL, and WNBA Stars NNEKA OGWUMIKE and DIANA TAURASI. Malcolm D. Lee directed it and it featured popular actor DON CHEADLE. Will it be a licensing powerhouse like its predecessor? Don't bet against it.

