

## **Chatting with “Mr. Bird” fulfills lifetime dream**

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Instant Replay

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As I anxiously and nervously made my way to the Boston Celtics’ locker room Saturday night, an hour before they faced off with the Cleveland Cavaliers in Richfield Coliseum, I was anticipating a crowded locker room stuffed with sports writers and other members of the media.

As I opened the door and glanced around the corner, I was surprised.

All I saw was Kevin McHale lying on a table getting his ankles taped, Robert Parish watching tapes of the Cavs’ game from the night before, Dee Brown getting suited up, and Larry Bird, who was sitting at a stall sporting his uniform trunks with tightly wrapped ankles.

Since 1981, I have been in awe of Bird’s talent on the hardwood and seen him play on different occasions in Detroit and Cleveland.

But I never dreamed of getting the golden opportunity to meet the player I think is basketball’s greatest player of all time.

At first, I thought I was in the wrong place since only one other reporter was there.

I slowly made my way towards Bird, not knowing what to say.

“Mr. Bird,” I said.

“Have a seat,” replied the three-time MVP.

Bird, all 6-9 of him, seemed very relaxed, so I took advantage of the situation.

To begin, I remembered a question that my publisher, Ken Parks, told me to ask – which golf course is more of a challenge, French Lick or Santa Clause Course?

“They are both about equal,” replied Bird with an inquisitive grin. “I have some trouble on the 15<sup>th</sup> on Santa Clause, but they are both nice courses.”

I had always heard that Bird was nasty when it came to reporters.

Not true. I found him easy to talk with.

I don’t know if it was the fact that I was the only one in a quiet room or that I referred to him as “Mr. Bird.”

Bird slipped over the Kelly green number 33 jersey as I asked him what has been one of his many outstanding accomplishments.

Without hesitating, he spoke of winning the NBA crown.

“Nothing tops winning the championship,” said Bird. “I’ve won the MVP three times, but that is voted on. I am proud of those and wouldn’t trade them for anything. But nobody votes a champion. You have to earn it on the floor.”

As Bird, who has been involved with three NBA championships, was putting one sock over his size 13 feet, I asked him what it meant to him to be able to wear the Kelly green and play on the parquet floor of the Boston Gardens. What has made it so special to be a big part of an organization that has captured 16 championship banners?

“Being loyal and dedicated to a team,” said Bird with a determined sound in his voice. “Playing a certain style of ball and producing when you are asked is the key. It means everything to me to be a Celtic. I wouldn’t play for anyone else; I would quit first.”

I then asked him if he thought he had lived up to that trademark.

“Oh, definitely,” he replied.

Bird then took a sip of diet Coke, laced up the dark green Converse hightops and stood up.

There I was, staring Bird face to chest with a tape recorder in one hand and a note pad in the other taking down everything he said.

As game time drew near and other Celtics made their way back into the locker room, I could tell that Bird was starting to focus in on the challenge before him. I asked him one more question: if he had some advice to give to the young kids, what would it be?

“I would tell them to stay in school and get an education and prepare for life,” said Bird. “Not everyone can play in the NBA, not many at all. I would tell them to go to college and get an education, find a job and take pride in it. If it brings you a check, then it’s valuable. I rode on the back of a garbage truck for a year; it wasn’t the best job, but I paid some bills, and that’s the main thing. Be proud of what you do.”

I thanked him and got up to leave but not before having him sign the March 3, 1986 issue of *Sports Illustrated* with him on the cover depicting The Living Legend.

As I found my place on press row, I was more than impressed that he took the time to talk with me. The 20 minutes seemed like 20 seconds.

Soon it was game time, and Bird and the Celtics were ready.

Saturday was vintage Larry Bird basketball as his statistics read 29 points, 10 assists and six rebounds as Boston defeated the Cavs 113-102.

Bird did it all.

The typical no-look passes and the famous fade aways from 19 feet and the running left handed hook shots in the paint were all demonstrated to perfection.

After the game, the locker room was the way I had originally pictured it – crammed full of reporters all wanting Bird’s comments.

I stood around with the others listening and soon exited to write my story.

As I left the locker room and the Coliseum, I realized I had done what I had always dreamed of doing. In my rookie year as a sports writer, I got to talk one-on-one with Larry Bird and then observe him perform his wonders on the court that only he can do so well.