

THE LAST FOLK HERO

THE LIFE AND MYTH
OF
BO JACKSON

JEFF PEARLMAN



MARINER BOOKS

New York Boston

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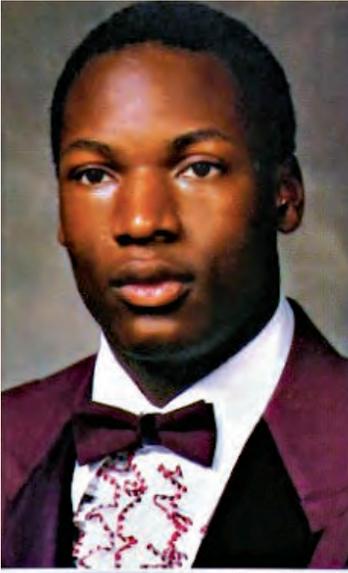
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He stood 6-foot-1. He weighed 227 pounds. He ran a 4.13 40. There are few sights in sports history as simultaneously glorious and terrifying as Bo Jackson in the open field. (Courtesy of Auburn University)



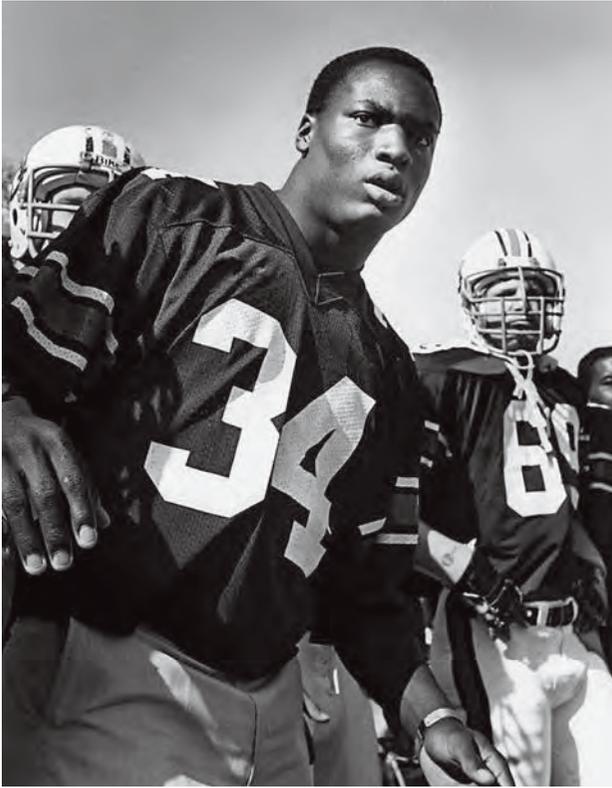
Vincent Jackson



At McAdory High, Jackson was a subpar student who—despite academic shortcomings—was genuinely liked by teachers, coaches and classmates. (Courtesy of McAdory High School)

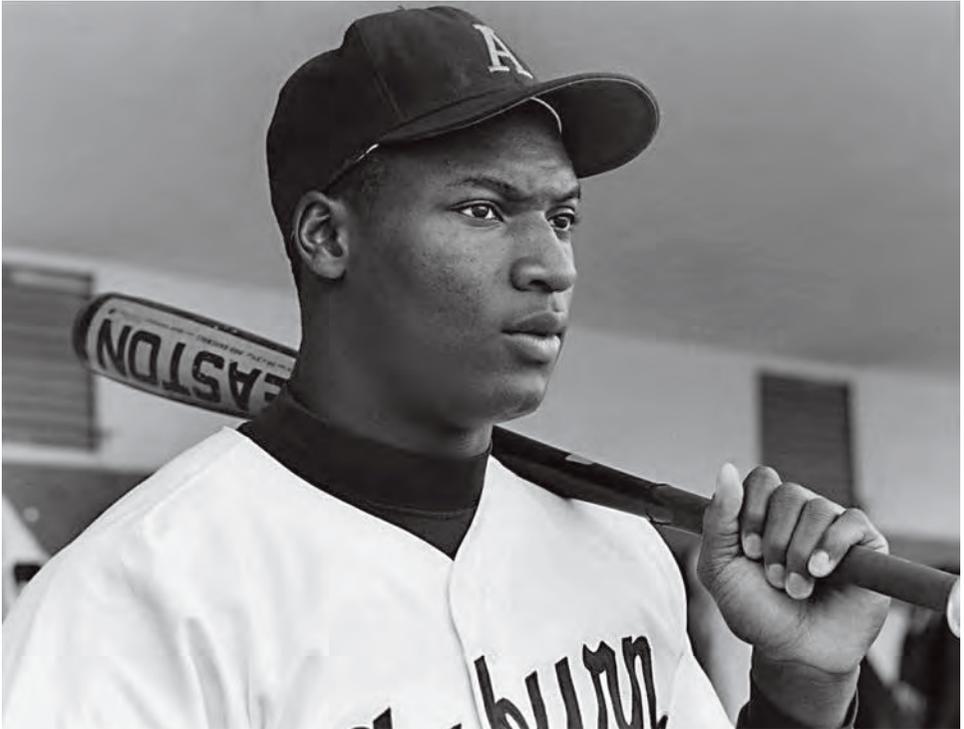


After helping lead the Tigers to a Sugar Bowl victory over Michigan, Bo gleefully chomped on a cigar. (Courtesy of Auburn University)



Although he was a college megastar beginning as a freshman, Jackson fit in well with his Auburn teammates. (Courtesy of Auburn University)

After struggling as a freshman, then sitting out as a sophomore, Bo emerged as a baseball force and one of America's best collegiate sluggers. (Courtesy of Auburn University)

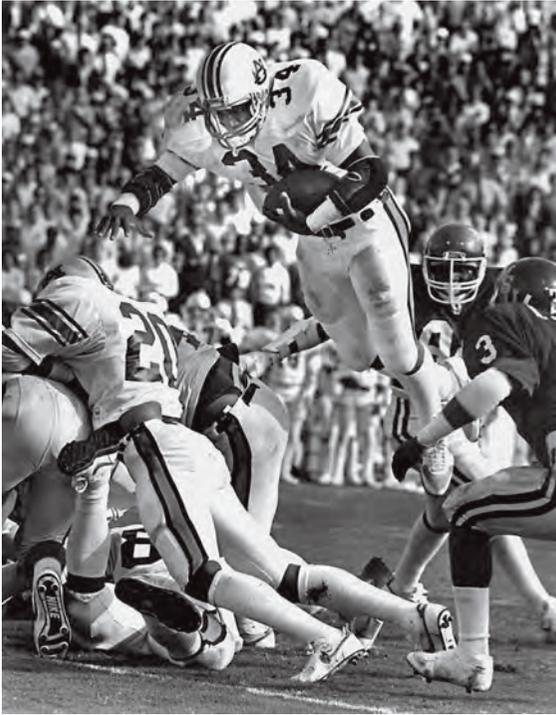




Jackson helps carry off Coach Pat Dye following the 1984 Sugar Bowl. Having been raised by a single mother, Bo embraced Dye as a father figure. (Courtesy of Auburn University)

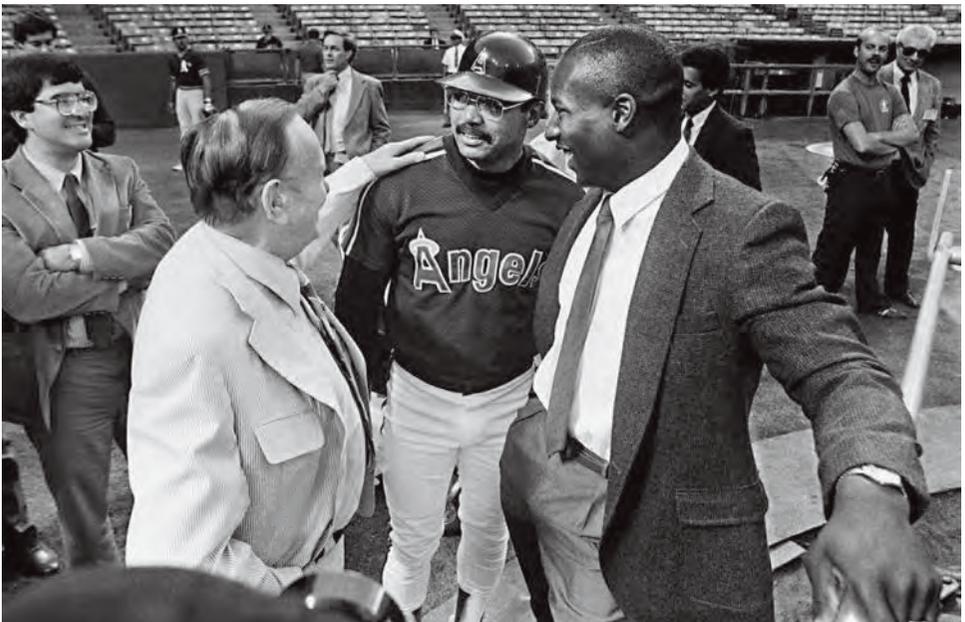
Jackson hated dealing with adults, but loved engaging with children. Here, he challenges young Auburn fans to a sprint across the field. (Courtesy of Auburn University)





Jackson could not, technically, fly. But his athleticism often created that illusion. (Courtesy of Auburn University)

In April 1986, the California Angels flew Bo Jackson out to Anaheim to hang with team owner Gene Autry (*near left*) and slugger Reggie Jackson. It was a recruiting trip that went poorly. “Once I got to meet Reggie,” Bo said later, “I was sorry that we have the same last name. He is an asshole.” (Photograph by John Cordes)





Bo Jackson graciously accepts the 1985 Heisman Trophy in front of a fawning crowd at the New York Hilton. Among those in attendance were his parents, Florence and A. D. (Courtesy of Auburn University)





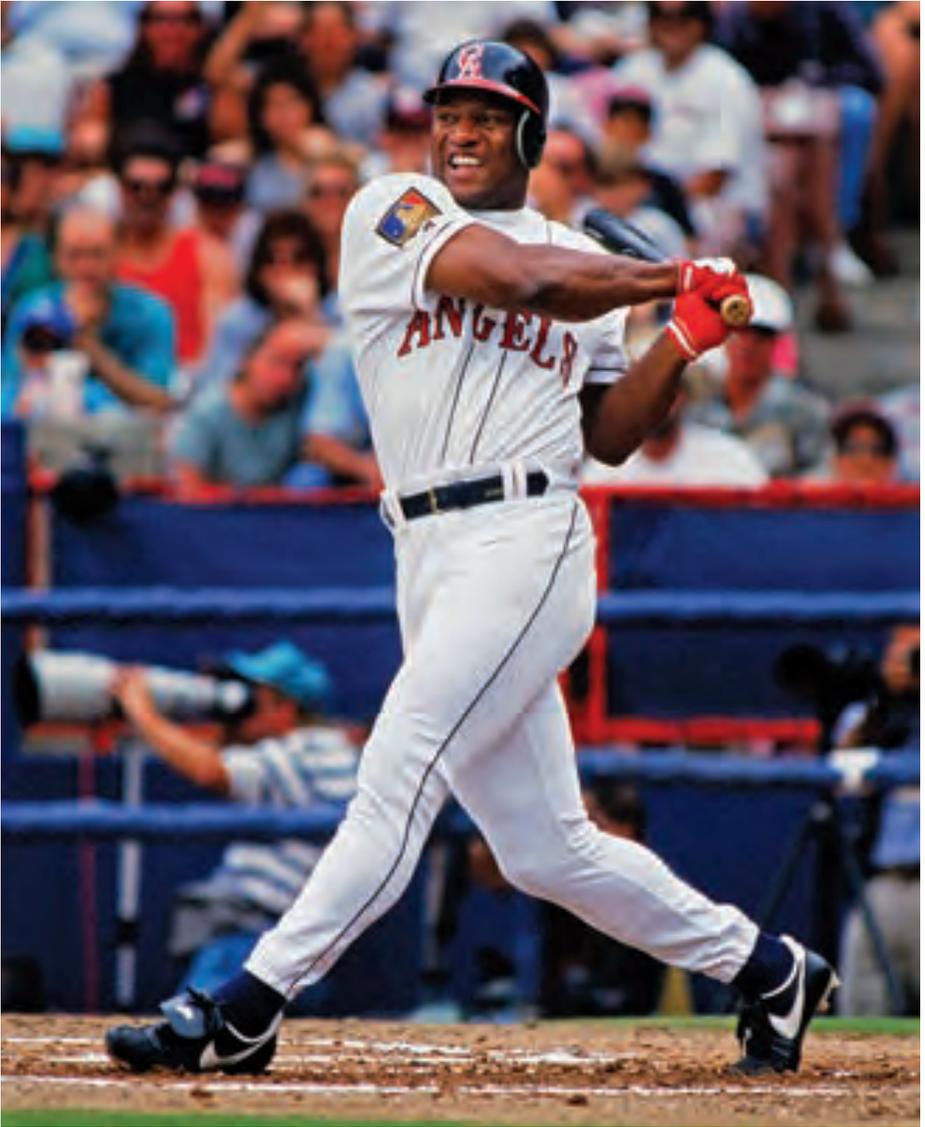
There were strong ballplayers, there were stronger ballplayers—and then there was Vincent Edward “Bo” Jackson, breaker of bats over knees. (Photograph by Brad Mangin)



After the Kansas City Royals made him a generous offer to play baseball, Bo found himself manning the outfield of the Double A Memphis Chicks of the Southern League. (Edouard Bruchac/*Birmingham News*/Alabama Department of Archives and History)



Though he was never one of the guys, Bo did his best to fit in with his Kansas City teammates. Save for a strong dislike of third baseman Kevin Seitzer, relationships went smoothly. (Photograph by John Cordes)



Bo's final season with the California Angels served as a sad farewell to professional sports. Playing on an artificial hip, he was a shell of his old self. (Photograph by John Cordes)

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On May 1, 2020, I was sitting on a bench in the back of my house, speaking via phone with my mother, when a blocked number popped up.

“Mom,” I said, “hold on one second. Lemme get this.”

Click.

“Hello?”

Mr. Jeff Pearlman?

“Yes?”

He didn’t have to introduce himself. I knew the voice.

But he did.

This is Bo Jackson.

Four days earlier I had sent Bo some of my work, along with a note telling him that my tenth book would concern, well, him. “I am asking for your blessing on the project,” I wrote, “as well as the chance to speak with you about your one-of-a-kind life. Which absolutely fascinates me.”

Though widely known to be surly and standoffish, Jackson could not have been warmer. He was driving his car somewhere in suburban Chicago, en route to pick up dinner for his wife, Linda. “I’m in traffic,” he said with an agitated chuckle. “It’s gonna take me forty minutes to get a damn chopped salad.”

He went on to tell me that he was happy and content and comfortable in his out-of-the-spotlight existence and that (dammit!) no, he wouldn’t grant me an interview for what, from day one, I have referred to as “the definitive Bo Jackson biography.”

“It’s nothing personal,” he said, “I like the quiet, subtle life. I like my privacy. I don’t have any problem with you writing a book. You’re a writer. I get it. But I’ve had so many people through the years wanting to write a book.”

We chatted for about a half hour. He reflected on his 1990 autobiography, *Bo Knows Bo*, as well as his charitable work. He told me his current high comes from “helping people—it’s my rush.” Which I loved to hear. As

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our chat wound down, I told Bo I would keep him abreast of my progress, and that—hopefully—we'd talk again. He wished me luck and, before hanging up, uttered something that has stuck with me. "Everyone wants to do a Bo book," he said, "but nobody realizes how hard that would be."

Bo Jackson was right. Well, sorta right. Not *everyone* wants to do a Bo book. But damn if it wasn't hard.

The first person I'd like to thank is, in fact, Bo Jackson—for the greatness, for the inspiration, for the mystique. And also for taking the time to call. Although he kept his word and we failed to speak again (I sent him several letters. I'm guessing they made wonderful kindling), I never felt any hostility or anger. Truth be told, by reaching out, Bo allowed me to say "Yes" when folks inevitably asked if he knew about the project.

"Is he doing it *with* you?"

"No," I'd reply, "but we spoke and he doesn't seem to mind."

In this business, one takes what he can get.

Like sports, books are a team effort, and for nearly two decades I've thrived in large part because I'm surrounded by an incomparable squad of loved ones and peers. My agent, David Black, is the king of goodness and serves as equal parts guardian, spokesperson and friend. Lucy Stille, my other agent (you know you're money when you have an "other agent") is the perfect blend of angel and Rottweiler.

Michael J. Lewis has now suffered the pain of proofing all ten of my books, and deserves the Rich Kotite Medal of Honor for such valor. Casey Angle, friend and fact-checker, is simply as decent and kind a person as walks the globe, and the wonderful Amy Balmuth has graduated from "Bo who?" to a PhD in the Life and Times of an American Icon. David Rosenthal is the best editor I've ever worked with, and a one-thousand-times-better guy. Ashley Brouwer is proof that plenty of roses grow in Alabama. Paul Gutierrez is the Vince Ferragamo we all need to know.

So many contributed to this project. I will never, ever, ever, ever, ever forget the kindness and hospitality offered by Angela Woods and family—who gave me the royal Bessemer treatment and a guided tour for the ages. Michele Souli's vast gifts as a genealogist helped me grasp the winding Jackson family history. (Seriously, if you're a writer in need of roots, Michele's gold.) Brad Mangin is one of America's great sports photographers and a dear friend/helper. Daniel Lubofsky charged way too little for his transcription skills. Luca Evans is a future journalism star who—on his rise to ink dominance—did his old professor some research solids. Bruce Weber

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is a people-find godsend. Megan Wilson is the Steve Grogan of publicists, Tommy Brown of the Auburn University Library went above and beyond, as did James Huxtable, my *Playboy* stash provider, and Glenn Clark, Joe Orsulak Society CEO. George Nunnelley, Auburn's assistant director of communications, walks Christ-like across media relations water. Oh, and John Carvalho went above and beyond.

Though decades removed from her turn as a University of Illinois cheerleader, Wendy Rosman's Japan Bowl artifacts were worthy of a hundred pom-poms. Mack Liederman serves as the Tecmo Bowl guru the world wants and needs. I have been several decades chronicling sports and I was lucky three former Major Leaguers standouts consider me decent enough to serve as sports verifiers. Shawn (Mazel) Green, Brian (Dog Fancy) Johnson and Dave (The Pride of Mahopac) Fleming—my gratitude is boundless.

So many athletes contributed to this book, and to try and name them all would take far too long. But I want to acknowledge the pure loveliness of Lionel (Little Train) James, Bo's friend and college backfield mate who died several months after speaking with me. His joy and sense of nostalgia radiated through the phone.

I hate lists, but here's a list of peeps who made *The Last Folk Hero* a thing: Ivy Givens (HarperCollins's five-tool phenom), David Eber (president of the Faye Dunaway Fan Club), Peter Hubbard (Tupac Shakur fan), David Robinson (finder of folks), Tamara Cottrell (the queen of Tuskegee yearbooks), Shawn Yapple (restroom archer), Michael and Max Vosburg (father-son purveyors of Bo love), Mary Beth Newbill (department head of Southern history and government documents at the Birmingham Public Library). Daniel Atkins, Lucas Montoya and Davin Decaro (Da Boys of Discord), Gary Miller (my Atlantic Ocean bass-fishing correspondent), Greg Campbell (assistant director of communications at Mississippi State), Andy Greenberg, Jeff Pinkston, Adam Lorber, Jim Hecht, Ramon Maclin, David Pearlman, Ian Browne, Mac Engel, Mirin Fader, Meghann Cuniff, Shane Summers, Andrew Murphy, Katherine Nails, Larry Rubama, Jonathan Eig, Howard Bryant, Michael Dolan, Erik Sherman, Poppy Pearlman, Norma Shapiro, Leah Guggenheimer, Chris and Jessica Berman, Jordan Williams, Isaiah Williams, Laura Cole, Richard Guggenheimer, Jon Wertheim, Dan Wetzel, Cory Giles, Shawn Anderson, Patrick Shuck, Marisa Elliott, Jack Silverstein, Elizabeth Newman, Timothy Bella, Mike Brodsky, Tim Mocco, Chris Herring, Russ Bengtson, Kevin DiBattisto and Ron Clements. Rest in peace to Dan Furman, a great man.

There are few journalism peers I admire as much as my friend and

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colleague, ESPN's Jeremy Schaap. There are few legendary scribes I revere as much Dick Schaap, Jeremy's late father and the co-author of Bo Jackson's 1990 autobiography, *Bo Knows Bo*. While completing this project, I aspired to create a continuation of Dick Schaap's work. Whether I succeeded or failed is up to the reader. But I tried to feel his presence throughout.

In case you failed to notice, this book is dedicated to my mother, Joan Pearlman. If there is a single person who taught me to appreciate the beauty of a Bo Jackson touchdown run . . . eh, it wasn't my mom. Or my dad, Stan Pearlman. Truth be told, neither of my folks know a damn thing about sports. But they know everything about supporting their kids. Which is even better.

While filling out college applications, my daughter Casey was asked by Chapman University to list her role model. She wrote, "Bo Jackson." And, yeah, it was a bit of a reach (her role model is obviously Brent Fullwood). But Casey's Bo love is real—and if you need proof, check out the poster hanging above her bed and the elation when Bo kindly Tweeted her warm birthday wishes. My son, Emmett, meanwhile, has gifted me with many late-night chats about Bo, and his ear for dialogue and narrative is way beyond his years. As Tyler, the Creator once said, "If the world was ending, I think I would grab some Cinnamon Toast Crunch."

When Catherine agreed to marry me twenty years ago, I don't think she foresaw two decades of ceaseless conversations about Doc Gooden and Brett Favre, Barry Bonds and Bo Jackson. But if love means never having to say you're sorry, I will refuse to apologize for the ten million *hences* and *hells* my wife has had to cut from my copy.

It is an honor to be on this side-by-side journey with such a rare jewel. I know.

A NOTE ABOUT SOURCING

Although Bo Jackson politely turned down repeated interview requests for this book, more than two decades ago Dick Schaap—co-author of Bo’s autobiography, *Bo Knows Bo*—generously donated to Auburn University’s library hundreds upon hundreds of pages of notes and interviews (as well as the actual cassette tapes) from his sessions with Bo dating back to 1989 and 1990. It was an invaluable resource that I am eternally grateful for. All unattributed Jackson quotations in *The Last Folk Hero* are from those chats.

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