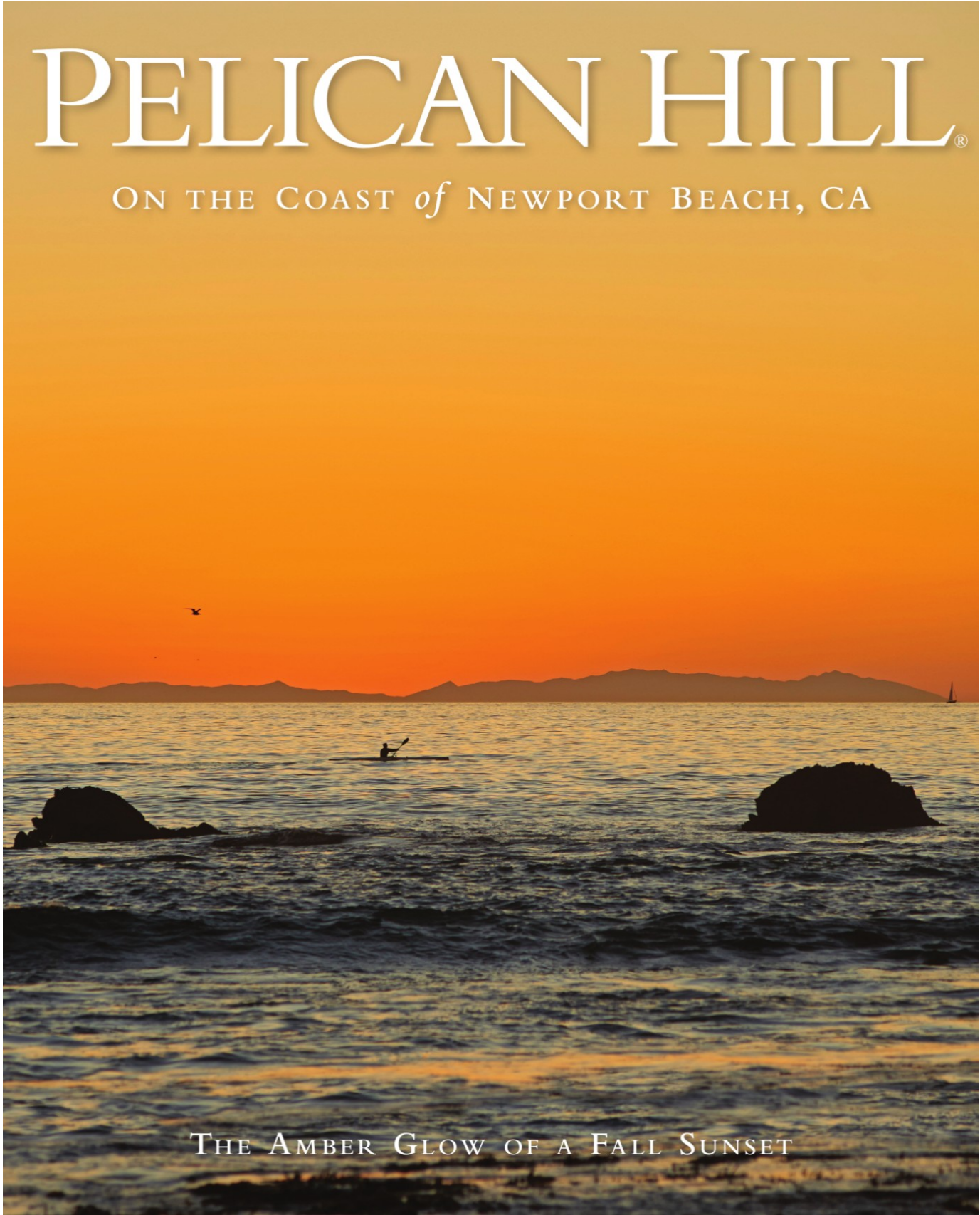


PELICAN HILL®

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THE AMBER GLOW OF A FALL SUNSET

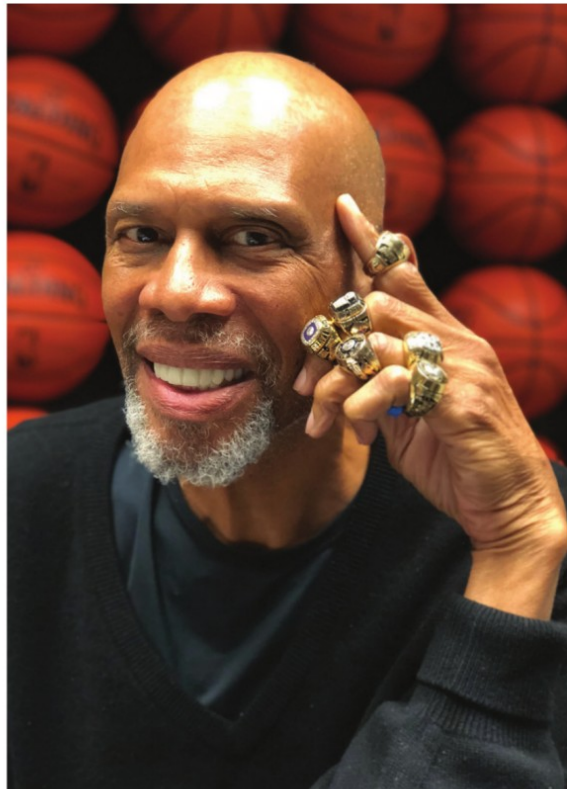
A CONVERSATION WITH
KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR

By Tina Borgatta

At 7-feet, 2-inches tall, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar towers over the fourth- and fifth-graders who gather along a tree-lined path in the Angeles National Forest. They're participating in a camp program offered through the Skyhook Foundation, and it aims to introduce kids — many of whom are English-language learners or come from low-income families — to science, technology, engineering and math (otherwise known as STEM). He founded the nonprofit in 2014, its name a nod to the move that helped make him famous — a special hook shot that's difficult to master because it's completed, essentially, in mid-air. In essence, he's inspiring kids to reach for the sky. "Throughout my entire career as a basketball player, I used my celebrity status as a platform to speak out against social injustices, particularly

institutionalized racism that prevents minority children from having the same access to education as white children," Abdul-Jabbar says. "Numerous well-regarded studies have reached this conclusion. A few minutes

on one's cell phone will confirm that this is true, but you know that those who don't want to believe it will never make the effort to find out. For me, the Skyhook Foundation is my attempt at not just talking about injustice, but doing something concrete that has the potential of changing children's lives here and now." As Skyhook's fifth anniversary year draws to a close, and as his latest book, "Mycroft & Sherlock: The Empty Birdcage" lands this fall (he's penned 15



best-sellers and has a television show in development), we sat down with Abdul-Jabbar to talk about his foundation, his storied career and his plans for the future.

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE SKYHOOK FOUNDATION — IT SOUNDS LIKE A WONDERFUL PROGRAM. ANY PLANS TO EXPAND TO OTHER AREAS OF THE U.S.?

We have our hands full just servicing the Los Angeles area. Our current funding isn't enough to expand beyond our local area, and even then, we have a six-year waiting list for new schools. Naturally, we'd love to expand to include as many children as possible in as many states as possible. But that will be dependent on our donors.

A SIX-YEAR WAITING LIST — IS THAT A MATTER OF FUNDING OR THE PROGRAM'S POPULARITY?

Both — word of mouth has gotten around just how effective the program is in inspiring children to participate in STEM classes and start thinking about STEM-related careers. Many children who have participated in the program entered believing that STEM careers weren't possible for them because of their color or economic background. But when they've graduated from our program, they have a whole new vision of the possibilities for their futures.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU MAKE AN APPEARANCE AT THE CAMPS?

I go up to the camp as often as possible — first, because I know they want to see the giant they've heard about from their parents; and

second, because it's inspiring to me to see these children so delighted by everything they're learning and experiencing. The joy I get from watching them motivates me to keep the Skyhook Foundation on mission.



WHAT DO THEY USUALLY ASK YOU?

"How tall are you?" is popular. "Can you still shoot a skyhook?" The answer, by the way, is yes. They're interested in me only because their parents and grandparents know me, not because they do. They don't have the same emotional attachment to my career, so I'm just that big guy who's kind of famous. Actually, I'm happy about that — I really want the focus to be on them and on STEM as a career path. I don't want them thinking about becoming a professional athlete instead of studying.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH THEM WILL LIKELY HAVE A MAJOR INFLUENCE ON THEIR LIVES. IS THERE ANY ONE PERSON WHO HAD A MAJOR INFLUENCE ON YOURS?

In "Becoming Kareem: Growing Up On and Off the Court," I go through all the people, good and bad, who mentored me in my life — from my first coaches to Wilt Chamberlain, Coach John Wooden and even martial artist Bruce Lee. If I had to pick one, I'd probably name John Wooden because our friendship lasted 50 years, so he influenced me for the longest time and in many different ways. Most important, he taught me how to win but made sure I knew that winning wasn't a substitute for being a good person.

BACK TO THE FOUNDATION: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE SKYHOOK AS THE NAME?

There's a very practical reason: People associate the skyhook with me, so that gets the foundation more attention. But I love our catchphrase: "Giving kids a shot that can't be blocked." It incorporates the success of my skyhook during my career as a shot that defenders found difficult to block. But it also implies that there are forces within our society that are determined not to give people of color a fair shot at life. Our name announces that we're not deterred by them but are determined to help children rise above them.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS?

I'd like to help as many children as possible have one of the happiest and most educational weeks of their lives. I want to continue to provide an experience for them that encourages them to see themselves as just as smart, worthy and competitive as more mainstream children.

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE NBA FOR A BIT. WHAT TEAM OR PLAYERS WILL YOU BE WATCHING THIS SEASON?

The Lakers are going to be in everybody's sights. Signing Anthony Davis is going to energize the team.



And the addition of DeMarcus Cousins will make them serious contenders for the championship. There will be a lot of expectations for the Clippers now that they signed Kawhi Leonard and Paul George.

AND THE LAKERS VS. CELTICS RIVALRY — THINK WE'LL EVER SEE IT HIT THE PEAKS WE SAW IN THE '60S AND '80S?

Such sports rivalries are inevitable, and they're a lot of fun. I have no doubt we'll see more in the coming years.

WHICH PLAYERS DO YOU THINK ARE GOING TO REALLY SHINE THIS SEASON?

The usual suspects will shine: Kawhi Leonard, Steph Curry, LeBron James and so on. People will be expecting a lot from Brooklyn even though Kevin Durant won't be playing right away. D'Angelo Russell has finally developed into the player the Lakers thought he would be. It took a few years, but his potential has manifested itself.

YOU'VE GOT A LOT OF NBA CAREER CREDITS: ALL-TIME LEADING SCORER, AN ALL-STAR 19 TIMES, A RECORD HOLDER IN NINE CATEGORIES, AN MVP SIX TIMES. WHEN YOU WERE A KID, DID YOU DREAM OF ACHIEVING THIS LEVEL OF SUCCESS?

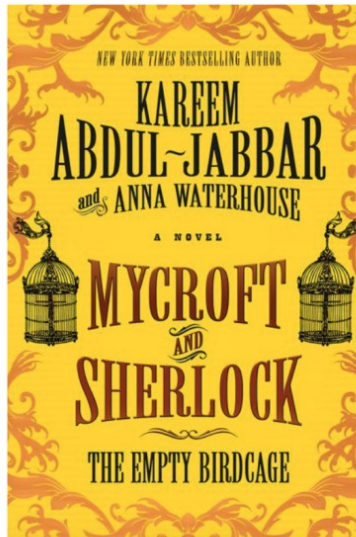
Every child athlete dreams of winning championships, setting records and being cheered by massive crowds of fans. When it's actually happening, the feeling isn't



the same because, as a child, you're just looking for the acceptance adulation brings. Winning is a means of being included and appreciated. As a professional athlete, setting records was merely a means to measuring my progress of pushing myself to become the best player I was capable of becoming. So, my pride in winning was about seeing how far I could evolve as a player, not in celebrating defeating or outperforming others. Today, I am so far removed from that time that I rarely think about it unless someone brings it up because someone is closing in on one of my remaining records. My feeling about someone breaking any of my records is always the same: I'm happy for them and for all of us because the bar of what we are able to achieve has just been raised.

SWITCHING TO THE PRESENT, YOU HAVE A NEW BOOK OUT.

"Mycroft and Sherlock: The Empty Birdcage" is my third novel in the series, and I think it's the best one yet. It involves the clever Mycroft and his equally clever partner, Cyrus Douglas, as they try to solve a murder involving eight victims across Great Britain, all with a cryptic message on their bodies. Of course, Mycroft's impetuous and ingenuous younger brother, 19-year-old Sherlock, insists on getting involved.



HAVE YOU ALWAYS LOVED WRITING?

In high school, my English teacher asked me to read my essays aloud and praised them in front of the class. This gave me the confidence to write more. When my freshman essays were also praised, I got the same feeling of pride and accomplishment I got from

winning a basketball game.

I didn't have the time to really explore my writing until I retired from the NBA, but since then I've written many books on African-American contributors to American history and culture as well as novels. I'm also a columnist for The Hollywood Reporter and The Guardian.

ANY OTHER BOOKS ON THE HORIZON?

I just finished writing for the rebooted "Veronica Mars" TV series on Hulu and have a television series of my own in development at Warner Bros. I also have a couple film projects I'm working on. But I have a few ideas for my next books.

YOU LIVE IN NEWPORT BEACH — ANY FAVORITE LOCAL HAUNTS?

I'm still in the exploring stage.

There are a few Asian restaurants that have potential of becoming regular haunts, but for now I just like walking on the beach and enjoying the water.

AND NOW, A FEW FUN RAPID-FIRE QUESTIONS...

STEAK OR LOBSTER?

Lobster

SPARKLING WATER OR FLAT?

Both

FRIED EGGS OR SCRAMBLED?

Scrambled

YOU DESCRIBE YOUR PERSONAL STYLE OF DRESS AS...

Conservative business attire, jeans and a sweater, or slacks and an

angora blazer. Given my size, stylish clothes are rarely found on the rack.

YOUR LAST VACATION WAS TO...

Belize, where I was able to snorkel in the beautiful barrier reefs. I also love spending time in Tulum, Mexico — it's still mostly undeveloped, and the beaches are pristine.

ONE PLACE YOU'VE NEVER BEEN BUT WANT TO SEE IS...

Machu Picchu — I'm going on vacation there this year.

THE BOOK YOU'RE READING NOW IS...

"Righteous," the second book in Joe Ide's "IQ" series about a young African American from the mean streets of Long Beach with Sherlock Holmes-like abilities. It's both clever and suspenseful. 📖

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