The Weird and Glorious Reign of Nike's Superhero Swoosh

LIVING THE DREAM

Photo Illustration by Lyne Lucien/The Daily Beast/Getty

The boy who idolized the San Diego Chicken would grow up to become a sports mascot himself. Then he got a call from Nike and a chance to become a genuine superhero.

David Wolman
Published Jan. 19 2020 5:05AM EST

In the summer of 1996, a professional sports mascot working in Minneapolis received a top-secret invitation. Nike executives wanted to fly him to the company's Beaverton, Oregon, headquarters for a tryout session. Details would follow. The man, who was in his seventh year playing Crunch, the high-flying mascot of the Minnesota Timberwolves, figured, "What the hell?" He packed his bags, including his favorite trampoline, and headed to the airport.

Inside the Bo Jackson Fitness Center on the company's sprawling campus, the man's jumps, dunks, half-court shots, and dances impressed the Nike team. For one stunt, his arm hit the rim of the basket so hard that it drew blood. (The fuzzy Crunch suit usually prevented such injuries.)

“The tryout was nerve-wracking,” the man recently recalled. He had tried to anticipate interview questions and resolved to do some talking about sport and authenticity. He even read the 1995 business book *Just Do It: The Nike Spirit in the Corporate World*, hoping it would provide insights into the company ethos.

Handout

“It wasn’t totally clear what they wanted. I remember just trying to accommodate whatever they needed. I dunked, played basketball, threw a football, and just tried to seem capable of anything. I interviewed with everyone there, trying both to impress and figure out what the hell they were up to.”

He was hired on the spot and whisked to Los Angeles for costume fitting. While there, he learned more about his new job, about what was shaping up to be one of the most elite, or at least unusual, gigs in mascot history.

A skunkworks team within Nike’s vast marketing division was launching an experimental program. The company’s typical contracts with sponsored athletes included performance clauses for appearances of Nike’s choosing, usually events connected with new product promotions. But executives within the new unit thought these athlete appearances, these “assets,” were underutilized. Instead of enlisting superstars merely to market a new line of

sneakers or make a cameo at some rich person's birthday party, why not produce huge events showcasing the greatest athletes in the world? The company could sell tickets, customize merchandise, control television production and distribution deals, and choreograph every moment to be in total service of the brand. They called their new project Nike Sports Entertainment, and in 1996 the team set to work staging sports-themed shows featuring the likes of Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley, Tiger Woods, Carl Lewis—and a strange new superhero named Swoosh.

Handout

In Los Angeles, the professional mascot was introduced to the costume designer who had created the suit for the Batman movies. He was given a full-body Lycra suit "and a huge jar of Vaseline, which somehow didn't seem weird," he said. "I put on the body sock and lubed up. A crew laid me back and covered my front in plaster, and I stayed in that spot for an hour as it dried." From this head-to-toe body cast, technicians fabricated a neoprene suit. The helmet and foam elements for Swoosh's chest and arms were sculpted from modeling clay. To one Nike executive who was there, the process was reminiscent of early stage car design. Cars are a lot less expensive, though: the suit cost $125,000. Nike bought two of them.

Handout

Over the next 18 months, Nike Sports Entertainment staged a series of extravagant shows, including a soccer game at the Orange Bowl between the national teams of Brazil and Colombia that segued into a Carlos Santana concert. There were track-and-field expos in Australia; another soccer spectacle, this time in Munich; a golf event in Japan starring Tiger Woods; and a traveling basketball show called Hoop Heroes featuring Jordan, Barkley, Scottie Pippen, Jason Kidd, and other all-stars. South Korea, Germany, Japan, South Africa, Florida—Nike-sponsored events were suddenly everywhere. And at each one was this mysterious new hero mascot creature thing, equal parts creepy, sporty, and corny. And yet now, 25 years later, a little bit awesome.

But who was that masked man?

Not many people see another person dressed up as poultry and think, *That is what I want to do with my life*. But that was the case for young Jon Cudo. It was 1980, Cudo was 11 years old, and the wildlife in question was the famed San Diego Chicken, alternatively known simply as The Chicken.

That spring, Cudo attended a professional soccer game at Met Stadium in Bloomington, Minnesota, between the hometown Minnesota Kicks and the Seattle Sounders. He liked soccer, but he was really there to see The Chicken, who by that time had such star power that he performed in cities beyond San Diego. Cudo would watch The Chicken on television, mesmerized. “It just made sense to me,” he recalled. Cudo’s mother, Carol, says her son thought the Chicken “was the coolest thing ever, oh my gosh!”

Late in the match between the Kicks and Sounders, there was a moment when the stadium was suddenly buzzing. Cudo knew it had to be The Chicken. He scanned the crowd and sure enough, in the stands above the far sideline, he saw what was happening: The Chicken was being passed hand-over-hand by the masses. “That was just magic,” Cudo remembered. “He was the center of attention, just having some harmless fun with an all-too-willing audience.” Cudo knew at some level that the guy in the costume was working, in the earned-income sense of the word. But he also knew The Chicken “must be laughing his ass off,” must be delighting in the chance to break rules and norms for the sake of good clean fun. In The Chicken, young Cudo saw socially acceptable rebellion, a childlike joy in doing what we aren’t supposed to do. In a word: freedom.

The San Diego Chicken, whose visual antics received rave reviews from Kicks fans on June 11 vs. Seattle, will return to the Met and strut his feathers, Sunday, August 10, when the Kicks host the Atlanta Chiefs.

Handout

Growing up in suburban Minneapolis, Cudo was a natural performer, singing along to Kool and the Gang, Billy Joel, and REO Speedwagon in the basement of the family’s ’70s rambler. Cinderblock walls, concrete floor, a stereo and turntable—it was the perfect tween concert hall.

The mattress on the floor meant Cudo could even jump and flip while singing for friends, his sister, or no one at all.

As a teenager, Cudo was well known in the principal's office; not for anything serious, just the goofball infractions of an attention-seeker who couldn't sit still. He was also addicted to sports. "If I told him he couldn't go somewhere, he'd stay in the driveway and shoot baskets all the time," his mother recalled. Yet Cudo was also coming to grips with a harsh reality that confronts most teenagers: the difference between someone who is fit and coordinated, like himself, and someone with the talent to be a world-class athlete.

In professional mascotting, he saw a third way, the perfect combination of sports and entertainment. High school would have been a good time to don his first costume, but Cudo's school, the Burnsville Braves, didn't have a mascot. (Soon after Cudo graduated, Native American names throughout Minnesota were dropped, and the Braves became the Blaze.) During college at North Dakota State University, he dabbled in theater and did some cheerleading, before finally winning the part of Thundar, the NDSU bison. On game days, before heading into the football arena, Cudo would blast Guns 'N Roses and dance around his dorm room to get pumped. (His roommate was usually away for the weekend.) It was a far cry from Chicken-level celebrity, but he could have done a lot worse than a badass mammal like Thundar.

Just after college, Cudo learned that the NBA expansion team Minnesota Timberwolves would have a mascot for their opening season. The year was 1989. At the time, only about half of NBA teams had mascots, but for expansion programs they were an important hedge, an added element of entertainment. Cudo won the job as Crunch, and at 20 years old found himself playing in the NBA. Kind of.

Mascots and other halftime gimmicks are ubiquitous today, but back then there was novelty and improvisation to acts like Cudo's. He modeled his performance after the comedic wizardry of The Chicken but combined it with more acrobatics. As soon as the announcer introduced him—"HEEEERE'S CRUNCH!"—Cudo was a man on fire, delivering crisp dance routines and mashing them together with stunts and slapstick. For one set, Cudo danced to Neil Diamond's "Forever in Bluejeans," then tore off the jeans and kicked into an MC Hammer routine.

The work was tiring. From November to late April, Cudo had appearances nearly every day. The adrenaline that goes with performing at night meant he stayed up late and slept through most mornings. He lived with an old college roommate at first, then in an apartment, and then his own house. For someone in his early twenties, Cudo was "totally living the dream," he said, a local celebrity in a job he loved.

Back then, Cudo was on the forefront of sports entertainment, part of a small cadre of mascots who were changing the game. To stay sharp, he figured Crunch needed rivals. Some nights, Cudo and other enterprising mascots would rent costumes and come up with a conflict of some sort. The internet was hardly widespread back then, which meant fans couldn't hop online to

verify whether Jazz Man was the official Utah Jazz mascot or just something born from Cudo's imagination the night before and made real with a rented suit and toy saxophone.

Among Cudo's creations was a character nicknamed The King. It was 1992, and the Sacramento Kings were in Minneapolis for a game. "The King was a live shit-talking mascot in the mold of a professional wrestler," Cudo said. (Clips also call to mind Tony Clifton, the famously acerbic alter-ego created by comedian Andy Kaufman.) To support the act, Cudo built a throne and recruited a few guys to carry him around the court during time-outs. From his elevated perch and dressed in royal mantle, he berated the traditionally mild-mannered Minnesota fans. Meanwhile, on the big screen, the crowd saw video footage of Crunch, bound and tied somewhere else in the building. It was one of Cudo's favorite acts and it showcased his versatility: He could play an athletic and cuddly goof, or he could be a loudmouth tyrant.

But could he be a superhero?

In 1995, Cudo was invited to join a trip to Australia as part of an NBA marketing tour. That was where he met Ian Campbell, a former Olympic track and field athlete and Nike veteran. At the time, Campbell was working with the NBA to promote its image outside the U.S.. He returned to Nike in the summer of 1996 to help run Nike Sports Entertainment (NSE), and it was around this time that Campbell cooked up the idea for a superhero. He had seen the popularity of NBA team mascots like Crunch, especially with audiences in Asia, and felt this was the special sauce NSE needed for its arena and stadium events.

But Campbell was no creative type. So a group of Nike designers, including outgoing CEO Mark Parker, put together sketches for a corporate mascot unlike any other. Keebler Elves? Weaklings. Tony the Tiger? Too sanguine. This hero would wear a sleek gray costume emblazoned with the Nike logo across a torso of pure muscle. His mask would convey a sense of mystery, if not menace, and he would never speak or sign autographs.

The character was neither Nike's first nor last foray into the world of comic book-type heroes. In the mid '80s, an advertising campaign for children's sneakers adorned with reflective material gave rise, ever so briefly, to Reflecto Man. Then there was Mandrake, the catastrophically unpopular remake of the University of Oregon Ducks mascot, which was also the brainchild of Nike "creatives." But Swoosh was different, the speartip of a big-budget global operation.

Handout

Back at headquarters in Beaverton, there were certainly questions. Les Badden, NSE's director of Event Production, said Nike lawyers were especially "persnickety about putting the corporate logo on some guy in a rubber suit." Colleagues outside of NSE kept asking what, exactly, Swoosh would be doing and where. Badden had his answer at the ready: "Swoosh is an athlete, not some sort of *clown*."

The mid '90s was also a different era when it came to America's relationship with superheroes. The Batman movies were huge hits, but pop culture wasn't yet awash with Avengers, X-Men, and countless comic book sequels, prequels, and spinoffs, with their ever thinning plots dependent on ever more portals. Who could say, really, that a corporate superhero wouldn't fly? If it did, Swoosh would round out a kind of marketing holy trinity, with brand as the holy ghost, Swoosh its earthly form, and Nike the one true God.

Cudo had been with the Timberwolves for seven seasons when he got the offer to work with NSE. He was eager to try something new, to push the mascotting envelope, but the decision to leave the NBA wasn't easy. At 27 years old, he had a coveted position in a highly competitive field where employment options are limited. More than that, though, he had come to love Crunch. The furry suit wasn't so much a uniform, but more like a longtime friend. One evening, when his tenure with the 'Wolves was ending, Cudo went downstairs to his basement, where his costumes hung in a closet and the giant Crunch head sat atop a bureau. Cudo picked up the head, held it in his arms, and cried.

The good news: He was taking a job at Nike. Nike! Even his mom was ecstatic. “Nike is so *awesome*!” she said. At that time in the company’s history, the shoe and apparel giant’s nearest competitors were nowhere close. With more than a quarter of the world’s market share for footwear, Nike was a culture-making juggernaut armed with mountains of money to spend.

The paint was still drying on Cudo’s new suit when he arrived in Tokyo for the Hoop Heroes show in September 1996. Rehearsal the day before the main event was a “train wreck.” It was Cudo’s first attempt to do anything physical in the Swoosh suit. The costume proved to be so stiff and unforgiving that he could barely even touch his hands over his head. It was also way too hot. “Jon was sweating like a pig,” recalled NSE’s Badden.

Handout

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Cudo couldn’t see through the Nike sunglasses that had been incorporated into the mask. After the rehearsal, he peeled out the plastic lenses and replaced them with cutouts from a pair of two-dollar panty hose purchased from a nearby convenience store.

The next night, before a sold-out crowd at Yokohama Arena, Michael Jordan dribbled against a 10-year-old basketball prodigy named Keijuro Matsui, played three-on-three with world-famous sumo wrestlers, and clowned around with Barkley and other superstars. The NBA had informed NSE that players could not play actual basketball games without violating their contracts with

the league, so the stars did on-court interviews and then ran through drills that, although commonplace for basketball aficionados, still took on a shine because of Jordan and Barkley.

Just before halftime, perched in the rafters above the highest seats of the buzzing arena, Cudo's hands shook as he reached out to take hold of a zipline affixed to a wire bolted to the wall and running the length of the building. Seconds later, he was flying—without a harness or safety net—out over the crowd, descending toward the middle of the court below. In hindsight, Cudo said, it's a miracle the show wasn't a disaster.

Handout

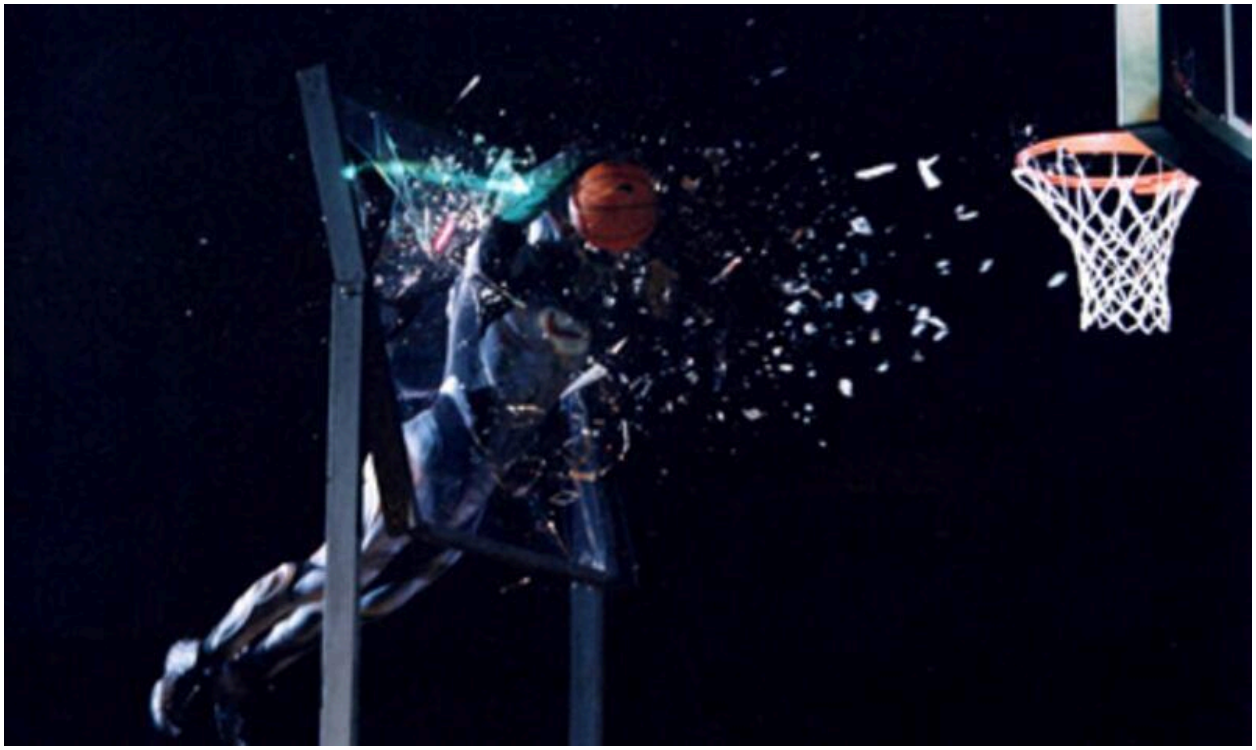
Far from it. Swoosh's trampoline-assisted dunks were on the money. The dance routines were perfectly in synch with the lighting and fireworks. Between stunts, Cudo marched around the court, smacking a gloved hand on a basketball in tune with a thumping beat. The fans were screaming the roof off. As a reporter from *Stars and Stripes* put it, "With more pyrotechnics, strobe lights, and throbbing rock music than a Van Halen concert, it was an event P.T. Barnum would've been proud of."

Reflecting on the electricity of that show, Cudo recalled: "I had done some cool stuff for the NBA and with other sports." "But that first event in Yokohama—it's hard to describe, but it was just… *insane*." After the show, still in costume, Cudo stood atop a Hummer as it slowly circled the

arena. “People were going berserk! It was totally unplanned. We didn’t want it to end.” For the man who had always marveled at how The Chicken could win the crowd, it was a hands-down career highlight. “Swoosh had a kind of rockstar following,” Cudo said. At least, in Japan.

Handout

Over the next year, Cudo embraced his new persona. The massive venues, the amped-up audiences, the chance to work alongside all these cool, driven Nike people: It was like mascotting—or this mascot, anyway—was finally getting its due. One of his favorite moments was during the show in Orlando. True on-court originality is hard to come by, Cudo explained, but he doesn’t know of anyone, before or since, who, dressed as a superhero, has crashed through a pane of glass on his way to dunking a basketball. “Needless to say, you get one chance at that one,” he said.



Handout

Yet a paradox of the giant venues and seemingly limitless Nike budget was that Swoosh remained a little-known quantity. Back in Minnesota, Crunch was a celebrity. But with Swoosh, there were few, if any, adoring fans, the magic of Yokohama notwithstanding. In the various countries where NSE staged events, the NSE team would drop in on Nike offices. Swoosh and the rest of the squad were treated like royalty on these stops, but that hardly reflected how the public was responding to this new character.

Meanwhile, Cudo heard occasional whispers of negativity about both NSE and Swoosh. He wasn't really surprised. "It was a little weird in that Nike as a brand is built on authenticity, but the character was a superhero, make-believe," Cudo said. Campbell heard the criticisms, too. "Of course this concept bordered on heresy for many in Beaverton!" Campbell recalled. "They didn't get the entertainment angle."

Cudo's initial response to this skepticism was to view it as a challenge to him and the rest of the NSE team to keep innovating, to create something spectacular. But as the performances and travel continued and Cudo moved into his second year as Swoosh, he was finding that the brand superhero gig came with unexpected complexity. For one thing, there was the difficulty with the suit itself. Poor quality sports apparel, you might say.

Handout

Then there was the more fundamental, if not existential, problem of identity. With typical mascot gigs, “you can play off a mistake,” Cudo explained, flopping down the stairs or improvising silly antics after a botched dunk sequence. Not so if your character is meant to be flawless: “Superman doesn’t trip on his cape.” As Swoosh, Cudo had to be "that badass cool guy who doesn’t miss. Ever.” He remembers one time, after a zipline entry, when he was walking onto the court and his foot caught ever so slightly on the edge of a stage. “It wasn’t anything really,” Cudo said, and he doubts many people saw it, but it stuck in his mind, a moment of broken trust between him, the character, and the audience.

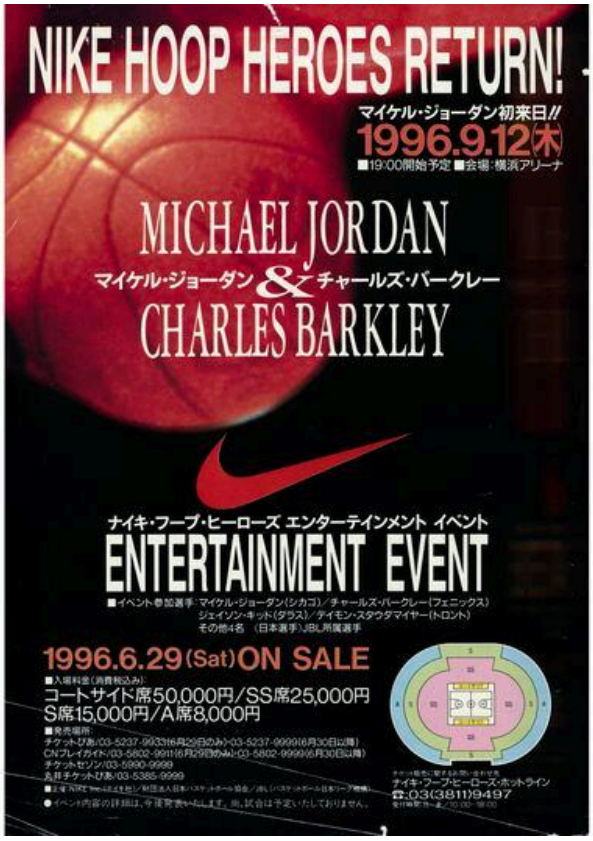
In time, it became a struggle to inhabit the part, to play the role of athleticism incarnate. Instead of offering creative freedom, the role of Swoosh was restrictive, stressful even. Mascots like The Chicken and that new bug-eyed thing for the Philadelphia Flyers don’t know how good they’ve got it.

Cudo’s difficulty with the Swoosh identity foreshadowed NSE’s own downfall. Nike was bankrolling wildly expensive events, but no one could really tell whether these expenditures constituted marketing efforts or the start of a whole new arm of the business. The Hoop Heroes pageantry was big in certain markets, and had turned a healthy profit, but NSE as a whole bled money. Doubts about the program’s value began to crystalize, along with concern that the venture was too far afield from Nike’s core mission of manufacturing and selling stuff.

In 1997, a sudden downturn in shoe sales, compounded by the Asian financial crisis, precipitated a wave of cuts within the company. Cudo saw the writing on the wall. “If you weren’t making or selling shoes there, you were in trouble,” he said. In the summer of 1997, NSE was shuttered almost overnight. Most of the team was let go or reassigned within the company.

When he was laid off, Cudo was “bummed,” not only because of the end of his run as Swoosh, but also because of the uncertainty ahead. Would he ever be a mascot again? He started his own company, Mark Out Productions, connecting teams, event producers, and sports entertainment talent.

As it turned out, although he never played a superhero again, his career as a performer was far from finished. In 2000, Cudo signed on to be Spot the Fire Dog for the WNBA Portland Fire. “I wasn’t sure what to expect with the Fire, but I completely loved that experience,” he said. “While it seems counterintuitive, as a mascot I have always preferred being with a bad team over a good team.” Not that the Fire was bad, but a setting in which the players aren’t some of the most famous faces on the planet offers, as Cudo puts it, a better stage to entertain and engage. When you’re performing next to a Barkley or Michael Jordan, “you can get lost.”



Handout

In 2003, Cudo got a chance to rejoin the NBA, this time in Cleveland. For the next 15 years he was Moondog, mascot of the Cleveland Cavaliers. Although he finds it strange that others in his profession assess their careers in terms of championships won by the home team (“I don’t really play in the games!”), the 2016 NBA Championship week was an undeniable highlight of his years as a performer.

Cudo is well aware that an NBA franchise, like Nike, is a business. Yet mascotting Cavs games was qualitatively different from Swooshing it up for the sports apparel colossus. Instead of being a sales gimmick or accessory to someone else’s stardom, Moondog, Spot the Fire Dog, Crunch, and Thundar are all, in that weird yet lovable way of mascots, part of their respective teams. Poor Swoosh never really belonged.

This story was produced in partnership with Atellan Media.

David Wolman