

# Resilience is a God-given attribute that sorts the legends out from the also-rans

SPORT

## Fr Vlad Felzmann

On Sunday 27th August, as I was pondering the theme of my next piece, I suddenly discovered that with 80 minutes played, a goal down and with only ten men on the field, Liverpool ended up defeating Newcastle 2-1. Hence the theme of this article.

Thanks to their resilience – a word introduced into the English language in the early 17th Century from the Latin verb *resilire*, meaning ‘to rebound or recoil’ – Liverpool snatched a sensational 2-1 Premier League win over Newcastle United.

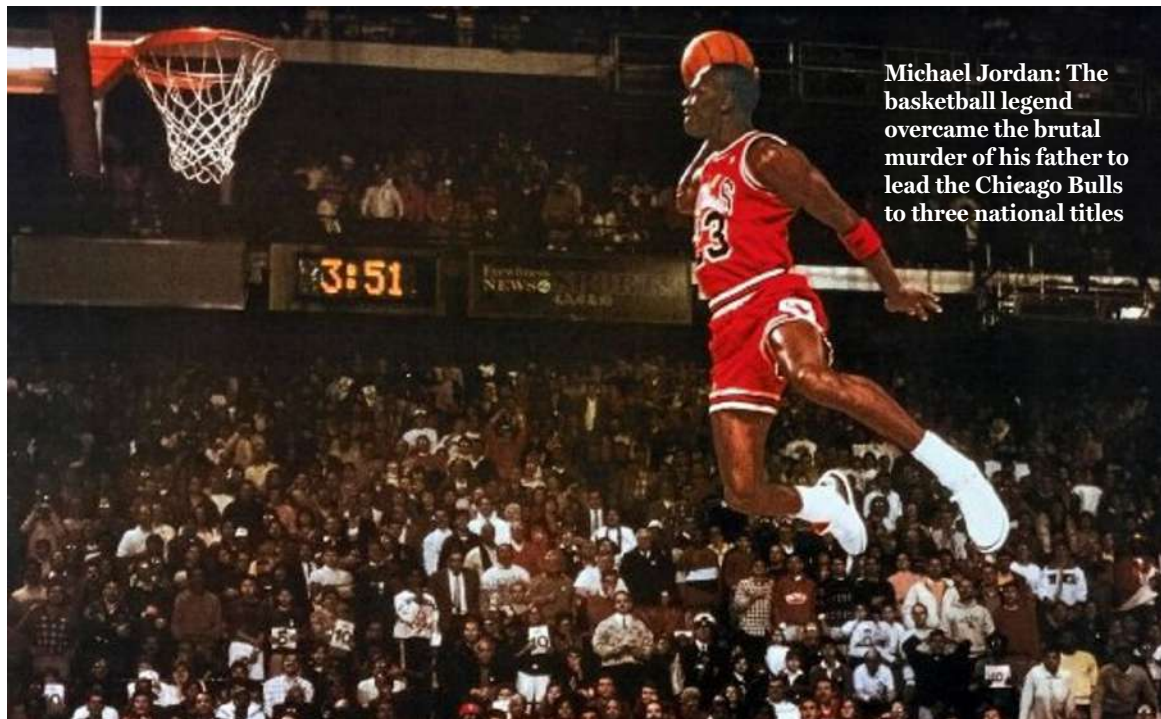
While being resourceful is an important part of resilience, it is also essential to know when to ask for help. During a crisis, everyone can benefit from the help of psychologists and counsellors specially trained to deal with crisis situations.

Resilience is important for mental health and well-being, and luckily, everyone can learn to be resilient. While some people may be naturally more resilient, it’s a skill that you can work on and enhance.

Reading about people who have experienced and overcome a similar problem can be motivating and suggest ideas on how to cope. Online communities can provide continual support and a place to talk about issues with people who have been in a similar situation. If you are having trouble coping with a crisis situation, consult a qualified mental health professional who can help you confront the problem, identify your strengths, and develop new coping skills. And then, attending support group meetings is a great way to talk about the challenges you’re facing and to find a network of people who can provide compassion and support.

Start by practising some of the common characteristics of resilient people and focusing on your existing strengths. Don’t get discouraged; becoming more resilient may take time, but the investment will have big payoffs on your health and well-being.

When administering the sacrament of Reconciliation in the confessional box, I tend to end my few words with something like these words: “Thanks to your weaknesses, you can be more understanding of the problems of others and, becoming more merciful, become more Christlike.” Having included this thought in a homily at Pentonville Prison Mass,



**Michael Jordan: The basketball legend overcame the brutal murder of his father to lead the Chicago Bulls to three national titles**

for the first – and so far only – time, at the end of Mass, I was given a standing ovation.

The applause is still there, within my heart.

As I often say: “Falling down is not important. Getting up is.” As Churchill put it: “If you are going through hell, keep on going.”

The mock Latin phrase of *Illegitimi non carborundum* – put collegially, ‘don’t let the b\*\*\*\*\*ds grind you down,’ was adopted by US Army General ‘Vinegar’ Joe Stilwell (1883-1946) during World War II while serving in the China-Burma-India theatre as his motto. I remember how it became popular when I was at Imperial College, 1958-62.

Hence one of my mottos: “Keep on keeping on-no matter what.”

The physical and mental strength of an athlete is what draws many people to sports and sports-related careers. We’re fascinated by their endurance and love the thrill of sport. In fact, a research suggests that fans even feel a surge of dopamine watching their favourite team or athlete do well. That’s why comeback stories tug even more at the heart strings.

Here are a few of the most inspiring stories of perseverance – and resilience – in professional sports.

**Monica Seles**, (born December 2, 1973) who won nine major singles titles, eight of them as a teenager while representing Yugoslavia, and the final one while representing the United States, was at the top of her game when, on 30th April, 1993, while playing a match, she was the victim of an on-court attack when an obsessed fan of Seles’ number one rival, Steffi Graf stabbed Seles in the back with a 9-inch (23 cm) knife as she was

sitting down between games.

Seles did not return to tennis for over two years after the stabbing.

Seles was ranked number one in the world at the time of the attack and was one of the brightest young stars on the tour having already won seven grand slam titles. The young athlete underwent surgery and lots of therapy before returning to the court two years later.

After the attack, Seles, showing exemplary courage and resilience, was able to win one more major title before she retired. Currently, present on Instagram, where she describes herself as a motivational speaker and author, along with being a mental health advocate, she is currently married to American billionaire Tom Golisano.

**Michael Jordan** is one of the best examples of resiliency in modern sports. This legendary icon was cut from his high school basketball team due to his, at the time, comparatively short stature of just 5 feet 11 inches.

However, the following summer, he grew four inches (10 cm) and trained rigorously, before moving on to become one of the greatest and most recognised faces in all of sports. In addition, he overcame emotional trauma after the brutal murder of his father. Jordan took a hiatus from basketball after his father’s attack.

On 6th October 1993, Jordan announced his retirement, saying that he lost his desire to play basketball. Jordan later said that the murder of his father three months earlier helped shape his decision.

His father, James R. Jordan Sr. was murdered on 23rd July, 1993, at a highway rest area in Lumberton, North Carolina, by two teenagers, Daniel

Green and Larry Martin Demery, who carjacked his Lexus. His body was dumped in a South Carolina swamp and was not discovered until 3rd August. Green and Demery were found after they made calls on James Jordan’s cell phone. They were convicted at a trial, and sentenced to life in prison.

After his return, Michael led the Bulls to three consecutive NBA titles.

Jordan was close to his father. As a child, he imitated the way his father stuck out his tongue while absorbed in work. He later adopted it as his own signature, often displaying it as he drove to the basket.

**George Foreman** grew up in Houston, Texas, and learned to box in a US Job Corps camp in Oregon. At the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, he won the gold medal in the heavyweight boxing competition. The 6-foot 3-inch (1.9-metre), 218-pound (98.9-kg) Foreman first captured the professional heavyweight belt by knocking out Joe Frazier in two rounds at Kingston, Jamaica, in 1973. He had won all 40 of his professional bouts, including a sequence of 24 consecutive knockouts, when he was beaten by Muhammad Ali in eight rounds in the Rumble in the Jungle in Kinshasa, Zaire (now Congo), on 30th October 1974. He retired from the ring in 1977 and became an evangelist and lay preacher.

Foreman resumed professional boxing in 1987 at age 39 and found immediate success. Despite his age and more than 30 additional pounds, Foreman remained a devastating puncher and captured the IBF and World Boxing Association (WBA) versions of the

world heavyweight title by knocking out Michael Moorer in 10 rounds at Las Vegas, Nevada, in 1994. In March 1995 Foreman was stripped of his WBA title for refusing to fight their contender and, rather than fight a rematch with IBF contender Axel Schultz, he resigned his IBF title in June 1995.

In 1997 Foreman retired from boxing again with a final career record of 76 wins (68 by knockout) and 5 losses. He was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2003.

**Bethany Hamilton** is an American professional surfer and writer who survived a 2003 shark attack in which her left arm was bitten off.

She wrote about her experience in the 2004 autobiography, *Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board*, which was adapted into the 2011 feature film, *Soul Surfer*, in which she attributes her strength to her Christian faith.

Most people thought this trauma would be career-ending, but Hamilton underwent surgery and returned to the water. Shortly after her return, the young surfer claimed her first National Title and turned pro full-time. Her For me, her tale is an outstanding story of bravery and resilience.

If you are keen on improving your own resilience – or those of your family and friends – remember that resilience comes with trying to take a PMS – a positive mind set, seeing challenges as learning opportunities, regulating emotions and expressing feelings in appropriate ways, as well as focusing on the things you can control instead of dwelling on what you cannot change. And never see yourself as a victim – have faith in, by committing to, all aspects of your life.

I have found out that underpinning resilient characters there are motivations that tend to be a mix of ambition ‘I want to be Christlike’ commitment, ‘I can’t let my family/friends/company down’, a competitive spirit, ‘I am not going to be left behind – and let him/her do better than me!’

And at times just a desire to survive: ‘I need to keep on keeping on-otherwise I will want to die.’

Confession and the sacrament of Reconciliation are great bulwarks for resilience. What sustains my own hope are the words of Jesus to the Good Thief on the cross: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” (Lk. 23,43) That promise stimulates me to pick myself up every time I fall. It underpins my moral resilience.