

**T**o borrow a line from that enduring Mel Brooks comedy *Blazing Saddles*: What in the wide, wide world of sports was Dennis Rodman doing in North Korea chatting up the North Korean despot Kim Jong Un? Well, permit your obedient servant to shed some light on that. It appears that Rodman, who goes by the nickname 'The Worm', was on a mission of 'basketball diplomacy' when he showed up in Pyongyang with the Harlem Globetrotters, the legendary clowns of basketball who annually tour the world spreading goodwill. Unbeknown to United States president Barack Obama or his assorted envoys, Rodman stepped from his plane and announced that he was looking forward to sitting down with Kim, who came to power upon the death of his cut-throat father, Kim Jong Il, in 2011. To ensure that he would not be perceived by the North Korean people as an alien invader, Rodman added, 'I come in peace.'

When Kim is not threatening to blow up the world, he is apparently fond of American cartoons. It was not that long ago that his government hosted a concert that featured Mickey Mouse and some other Disney characters. While Rodman was not created from the imagination of an animator, he could surely pass for a cartoon figure, given that he has been known on occasion to appear in public wearing a wedding dress. Generally, he has toned down his act since he played in the NBA, where he was a star rebounder

on some championship teams and has been enshrined in The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. But he is still the same old Dennis, which is to say he is covered with enough tattoos and piercings to be on display in a carnival tent. The Worm had the good taste not to dye his hair orange for his 'summit' with Kim, who notwithstanding undoubtedly took one look at 6-foot-8 Rodman and wondered who among his conniving court had dropped a tab of acid in his tea. For his part, it seems safe to say that Rodman looked upon the cheerful tyrant not unlike the attendant behind the counter where he drops off his dry cleaning.

But they got along splendidly. It was as if they were two old fraternity brothers. While Rodman would later say he was aware of the human rights violations that North Korea has committed, which include executions, torture and wholesale banishment to forced labour camps, Rodman overlooked the blood on the hand he was shaking and explained that Kim was 'a good guy to me'. Rodman added that while he does not 'condone what he does', he was charmed by Kim 'person to person' (or, if you would prefer, 'freak to freak'). Rodman seemed pleased to share with the world that Kim told him he does not 'want to do war'. In fact, Rodman stated that he found Kim to be such fine company that he planned to revisit North Korea for a vacation soon. Upon landing back in the United States, Rodman even

*Dennis Rodman and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un applaud an exhibition basketball game in Pyongyang*

delivered a message on behalf of Kim to the White House.

'He loves basketball ... I said Obama loves basketball,' Rodman said. 'He told me to have Obama give him a call.'

**P**oor Dennis. Only he could find himself in an audience with one of the cruellest authoritarian leaders in the world and somehow get him confused with Dr Seuss. Exactly what did Rodman think would happen: that Obama would give Kim a call and invite him over to shoot some hoops, at which point North Korea would disarm itself of nuclear weapons and world peace would be declared? Alas, just the opposite happened. No sooner had Rodman boarded his plane back to America than the old hostilities between North Korea and the United States heated up again, as the 'awesome guy' with whom Rodman had become acquainted began sabre rattling. Kim announced that North Korea was 'in a state of war' with South ▶

# THE ODD COUPLE

Former NBA star Dennis Rodman has a new 'friend' he would like America to meet. International diplomacy may never be the same again

**WORDS: MARK KRAM JNR**



Korea and added that he planned to 'settle accounts' with the United States.

Given the continuing poor relations the United States has had with North Korea, the Obama administration did not exactly embrace the diplomatic intervention by Rodman. While Obama himself had no comment on Rodman or the request by Kim that Rodman had delivered to him, White House spokesperson Jay Carney said channels of communication are in place between the two governments and the United States would continue to use them. Carney added that perhaps the North Korean government should concern itself with the well-being of its citizens and not on 'celebrity sporting events'. On the ABC News programme *This Week*, host George Stephanopoulos interviewed Rodman in the wake of his encounter with Kim. Stephanopoulos quoted a government source as saying, 'There is nobody at the CIA who can tell you more personally about Kim than Dennis Rodman. And that in itself is scary.'

Stephanopoulos asked Rodman if he stood by his quote that Kim and his deceased father were 'great leaders'.

'What I saw in that country,' Rodman began, 'I saw people respect him and his family ...'

Stephanopoulos asked if they were forced to.

Rodman said no. He then characterised Kim as 'very humble'. When Stephanopoulos informed that Kim had stated previously he had intentions to 'destroy the United States', Rodman explained that that was handed down to Kim from his father, and that the 28-year-old son did not share that belief. While Rodman conceded that Kim 'loves power', the perception he had of him when they sat and talked was that he was a 'great guy'.

Stephanopoulos: 'A great guy who puts 200 000 people in prison camps?'

Rodman: 'Well, you know ... we do the same thing here.'

Stephanopoulos: 'We have prison camps here in the United States?'

Rodman became flummoxed at this point and conceded that he is 'not like a diplomat'. When Stephanopoulos then observed that it sounded as if Rodman was apologising for Kim, Rodman said he does not condone what the North Korean leader does but still considers him 'a friend'. Stephanopoulos said, 'Someone who is hypothetically a murderer who is your friend is still a murderer.' Rodman countered by saying, 'Guess what? Guess what?

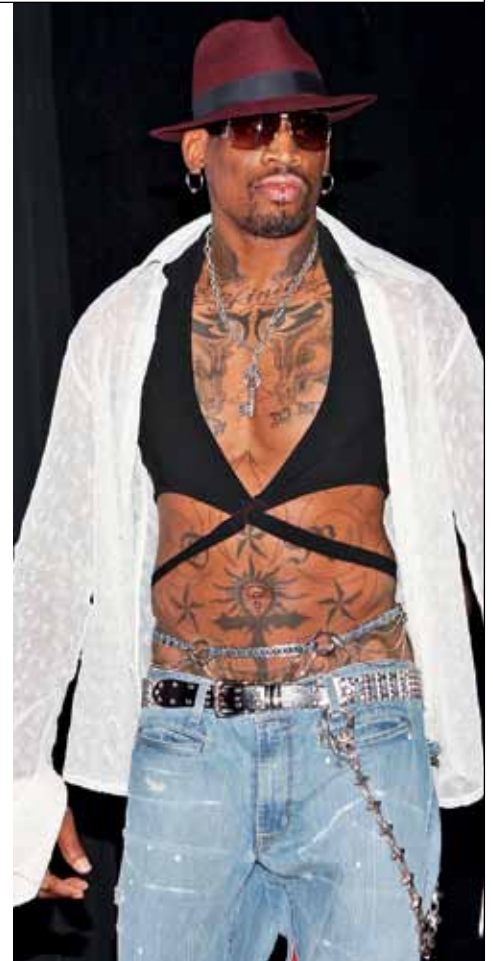
What I was, was history.' When Rodman said he planned to go back to North Korea, Stephanopoulos said he should take along a report from Human Rights Watch and ask Kim to explain himself.

Rodman grinned wildly and asked Stephanopoulos not to hate him.

America laughed at Rodman. They have been laughing at him for years. But beyond the crazy getups in which he arrayed himself – and that included a strong proclivity toward cross-dressing in public – Rodman was fundamentally an unhappy man in search of approval. Abandoned by a father who by his own count sired 47 children, Rodman was raised in poverty in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas. Growing up, he was an introvert, so uncertain of himself in the presence of the opposite sex that he wondered if he was not homosexual. (Contrary to his very homosexual attire, he claims he is not, although he concedes that he does have gay friends and he has allowed them to kiss him on the lips.) Given his upbringing, it was revealing that he asked Stephanopoulos not to hate him.

Unable to hit even a layup during basketball tryouts, Rodman was cut from his high school team. Upon graduation, he took a job as a janitor at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, and it is there he would have remained were it not for the sudden growth spurt he experienced. He played for a year at Cooke County College in Gainesville, Texas, had some success and transferred to Southeastern Oklahoma State University, where he averaged 25.7 points and 15.7 rebounds a game and won NAIA All-American honours for three consecutive years. The Detroit Pistons selected him in the second round of the 1986 draft.

Rodman blossomed from a bench player into a key component of NBA championship teams in Detroit in 1989 and 1990. Although his years in Motown were not without a degree of controversy, which stemmed from calling Boston Celtics star Larry Bird 'overrated' because he was white, Rodman became a stellar defensive player and rebounder with ►



*Rodman arrives at the 2005 Maxim magazine Hot 100 party in Hollywood*

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## Beyond the truly extraordinary career he had in the NBA, life has not worked out the way Rodman had once hoped

the Pistons. But his personal life was in chaos. In the wake of his divorce from his wife, Annie Bakes, with whom he had a daughter, Alexis, Rodman was found asleep in his car with a loaded shotgun. But instead of committing suicide, he chose to 'kill the shy imposter' he had become and just be himself.

The Pistons shipped him to San Antonio, where he remained a fine player but with an added twist. He dyed his hair blonde ... and then red ... and then purple ... and then blue. I interviewed his hair stylist back then – one David Chapa, who became the creator of 'The Rodman Do'. Chapa told me, 'He is a showman at heart. He told me once, "People expect me to be a showman, so I give it to them."' Chapa paused and added, 'He is crazy.' Rodman dated the pop legend Madonna. The Michael Jordan-led Chicago Bulls acquired him in 1996 and he won NBA championships in 1996, 1997 and 1998. But by then his NBA career was nearing an end, at which point he played overseas in Finland and the United Kingdom. He even penned a second biography, which he called

*Rodman celebrates shooting a three-point field goal for the Chicago Bulls against the New Jersey Nets in their NBA play-off game in 1998*



*I Should be Dead By Now*. He promoted it by sitting in a coffin.

**O**n CNN not long ago, anchor Anderson Cooper was presiding over a discussion with chief international correspondent Christiane Amanpour and another guest. The topic was the escalating tensions between the United States and North Korea and what Cooper called the 'bellicose rhetoric' that Kim Jong Un was hurling on to the world stage. When Cooper asked her what could be done to ease the hostilities that had erupted, Amanpour said, 'We can laugh, we can laugh but what did Kim say when he spoke with Dennis Rodman? He said Obama should call him.'

Cooper blinked in astonishment and replied, 'Christiane, did you ever think you would find yourself quoting Dennis Rodman?'

Beyond the truly extraordinary career he had in the NBA, life has not worked out the way Rodman had once hoped. He has been married and divorced two other times since his first wife departed – once to the actress Carmen Electra, who left him in less than a year, and once to Michelle Moyer, with whom Rodman had a son, DJ, and a daughter, Trinity. He had hoped to be a better father than his own had been, but only his eldest daughter is on speaking terms with him. He has battled alcoholism for years and told Oprah Winfrey in an interview he did not think he could ever conquer it.

But Rodman is upbeat these days. There is still a demand for his autograph, so he travels around the country doing paid signings. He also does occasional speaking engagements, television appearances and what he calls 'consulting'. Given that he said 80% of former athletes go bankrupt within a few years of retirement – by the way, an estimate that may not be far off – Rodman has said he is doing just fine. When he came back from North Korea, an Irish gambling company arranged a trip for him to the Vatican City as the papal conclave convened for the selection of the new pope. Rodman said, 'I want to be anywhere in the world I am needed.' And he reminded everyone this: 'Wherever you see Dennis Rodman, you can always come up and shake my hand.' ■

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