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. . . Jesse Jackson

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holding the dying man in his arms. Not only do those who were there say Jesse lied, but his own version of the story changes from time to time.

He is accused of being a cold-blooded opportunist with an almost uncanny knack for turning often delicate political situations into chances for self-promotion. In 1984 when he went to the Middle East to free a black pilot shot down in Syrian-held territory, he was accused by some of grandstanding.

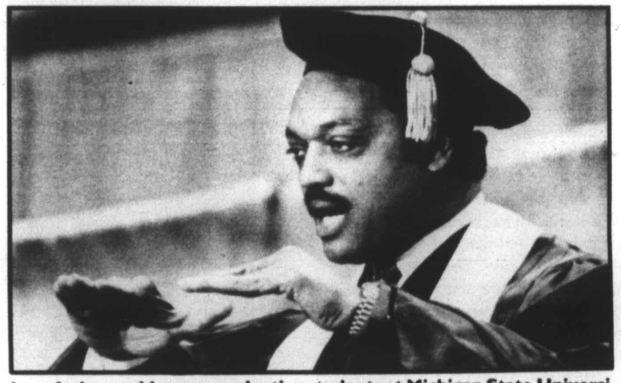
Jackson's personal life has also been rumor-riddled. He and his half-brother Noah Robinson, Jr. have had a tempestuous on-again, off-again relationship that seems a classic sibling rivalry. Although they really didn't get to know each other until they were adults, they seem to share enough characteristics, good and bad, to have trouble getting along.

Because of the financial and organizational woes of PUSH, the Chicago-based civil rights organization Jackson started in 1970, he is accused of being an indifferent manager. A characteristic he shares, oddly enough, with the current President of the United States. At least Jesse admits he is a "Tree shaker, not a jelly maker."

Jesse-watchers have long wondered whether his managerial indifference extends to his family. There have been persistent rumors of other women over the years, but 22 years and five children later Jesse and Jackie Jackson are still together and declare themselves a family. In a 1984 interview with the Washington Post, Mrs. Jackson, often described as a strong, self-possessed woman, frequently said during the interview, "I will not allow myself to be misused." It may be a philosophy that extends to her relationship with her husband. Unlike most political wives she has not felt it necessary to be constantly at her husband's side as he criss-crosses the country.

What message is there in the still early life of this complex man? This summer brings the end of another chapter in his life. It means that once again Jesse Jackson must re-invent himself. It is hard to think of someone who is on television so much and who has garnered so much print to be unemployed, but he is. Like the out of work steel worker, Jesse Jackson has to figure out what his excellent political training prepares him to do in the post-election world.

Putting "Leader" on your resume under occupation can limit your options. Many people who claim to know Jackson feel the vice-presidency would not have been a big enough job for this restless traveler. There is even the suggestion that he is not really interested in actually being president; that what he really likes is RUNNING. If that is true, then watching Jesse Jackson carve out a new role for himself after the election may be as interesting to watch as his 1988 campaign has been.



Jesse Jackson addresses graduating students at Michigan State University March 12, 1988. Jackson was presented with an honorary doctorate of humanities at the commencement ceremony. (UPI)

It is most likely that Jackson will remain self-employed. He has started a PAC (political action committee) called "Keep Hope Alive" which will allow him to continue to push for voter registration and to speak out on the issues he and his followers fear will not take high enough priority after the November election, no matter which party wins: the military budget, saving family farms, Central America, minority and women's rights and apartheid in South Africa, to name a few. If this new venture is successful, it will give Jackson the platform he needs to sustain his one-of-a-kind political career between elections.

For black Americans who feel love for Jesse Jackson and a deep pride in his rise to power, the race has already been won. Jesse won our hearts before we even knew his name. He won the real race when he chose to go to college instead of running the streets. He won it when he married his girlfriend and became the legitimate and responsible father to his children. He won it when he tried and failed and came back, with more knowledge and more confidence, and tried again. He won it when he helped us see the difference between breaking the law and ignoring tradition. He won it when he looked at an overwhelmingly white world, learned its terms and took it on because he knew he was as good as the best that world had to offer.

In what was perhaps a pep talk for himself as well as for his followers, Jackson, addressing the NAACP convention in Washington recently, thundered, "One thing I know — I may not be on the ticket, but I'm qualified! Qualified! Qualified!"

It is unlikely that Jesse Jackson will ever be President of the United States, although only a fool would absolutely rule it out. That could be a blessing since the achievement of that lofty office valued so deeply by the white world might obscure the simpler but more important odyssey of one black man's search for legitimacy and his profound desire to be more than he was ever expected to be. His effort represents the "outside child" in us all.