When Sports Illustrated needed a hologram of basketball star Michael Jordan for its 1991 Sportsman of the Year issue, it needed the same skills that make a great athlete: speed, experience and an unerring eye.

It found them in Sharon McCormack, one of the leading holography artists in the country.

McCormack, who lives in White Salmon, Wash., had just finished the hologram for the cover of Prince's new compact disc, "Diamonds and Pearls" when she got the 11-hour assignment.

At the end of October, Sports Illustrated's publisher decided to feature a three-dimensional image, or hologram, of the magazine's annual sportsman of the year Chicago Bulls guard Michael Jordan — on its Dec. 23 cover.

That put Karen Mullarkey, SI director of photography, in the proverbial full-court press.

"Every time we came to a fork in the road, time determined our decision," said Mullarkey, who had only six weeks to produce a piece of art that usually takes four months. "People thought we were crazy."

SI decided on American Bank Note Holographics — the company that prints the holograms on Visa cards — because the company had the technology to quickly produce the 4.1 million-embossed foil holograms the magazine needed.

ABN immediately called photographer McCormack, who has worked on projects with them for five years. She then pined down an appointment with Jordan for a Nov. 18 photo session in Chicago.

The assignment followed on the heels of baseball card photographer McCormack shot earlier in the year of players Nolan Ryan, Rickey Henderson, Dave Justice and Cal Ripken Jr.

McCormack, who says she tried doing all kinds of art in college, graduated from Ballou State College with an emphasis on photography.

Her fascination with photography began with a college class on light and art. When she heard that someone was producing images that looked three-dimensional, she said, "That can't be true."

Instead, she traded a display of laser holograms to the Illinois Institute of Technology in San Francisco and took a short, introductory course in holography for Christmas break in 1979. She was hooked, but she didn't know it.

McCormack dropped out of graduate school in cinematography in 1981 to visit France in The Netherlands. Then, she took a course in holography and showed a show of her photographs to which she had added materials for a three-dimensional effect. The show traveled to several other European cities. Then, the American Embassy in Paris commissioned her to do a photo exhibit highlighting the U.S. Bicentennial for a show in The Netherlands.

McCormack went to Africa and the Middle East. She returned to San Francisco, got married and moved to holography, in which, as it turned out, she could use her photography. She started companies and worked with other labs, but continued studying at the holography school, where she earned her degree in 1979.

Since the art form was unknown and untried, everything was experimental. "There were no rules," she worked a lot, "because I knew better by hands-on, by myself," she said.

McCormack helped her mentor with designing and, on her own, she fabricated leasing systems. She spent four months in Japan making a deal for a company that made holograms for more displays. When she returned to San Francisco, she worked as a show of her holograms.

In 1979, she started making her own computer-controlled machines, because "I knew what I wanted." She made three-of them: 90 days, and in 1981 she was commissioned to make "Time Magazine," in which she mixed live action with computer graphics. Image-matching is one of her specialties.

But her big breakthrough came in 1986, when she produced a full-color hologram of a clown, which she sent to a Japanese client, showing her that she had to right, smiling face, as she handed McCormack to try the hologram, she took her bare hands from the film itself, so that her hologram also seemed to move.

She used the same technique, called stereography, to produce a gift for Michael Jordan. Another of her specialties, it's a 3-D degree, moving light sculptures that shows Jordan passing a basketball around his waist.

McCormack, who now minimizes her expertise, said she made many of his assignments came about because "it is a small field, and I have been around a long time."

For the last five years she has worked as an independent holographer with American Bank Note, which created the image for the cover of the March 28 National Geographic, the first hologram in a magazine.

McCormack resists head of the School of Photography, but says, "I just works with advanced students. She moved from San Francisco to the Columbia River Gorge last March, because "I got tired of my line in traffic" in traffic.

The making of Michael Jordan's holographic smile

Holograms, says Sharon McCormack, are "as close as you can get to replicating reality within a frame."

Sports Illustrated's Dec. 23 issue is in the first frame produced, 2-D holograms of a person in motion. By 1992, it's millions of copies.

To make the image of Jordan, McCormack used a specially altered Nikon, photographed Jordan while he slowly rotated right to left 10 degrees on a turntable.

At the right moment, McCormack told Jordan to slowly break into a grin and slowly increase it into a wide smile — but not moving his body. The process was repeated several times. McCormack then used her eye. He was a good subject," said McCormack.

McCormack shoots a strip of 200 movie frames — about 10 seconds of shooting — which best captured Jordan's charm and sent it to New York, where American Bank Note made the hologram and reproduced it using the same negative.

The negative was placed in a light box, and a series of red, green and blue light beams were projected onto it. The first hologram was produced on black and white day for "showing" the hologram to a model, then the labels were taken to a different plant, where they were attached to pre-printed covers, which were shipped to the right plants where SI added the captions.

Despite the rapid technical innovations since she started, McCormack compares holography today to the early, "dinosaur stage of photography," where pictures were produced in silver or silver-contrasted copper plates.

"The process is no different," she says. "It reveals a realistic image unlike any other medium.