The Easy To Miss Greatness of Tim Duncan

Tim Duncan has retired.

If you are a fan of the game of basketball, those words should mean something to you. Duncan is a first ballot Hall of Famer. He is arguably the greatest power forward in the history of the NBA. I could easily type thousands of words to help explain why Tim Duncan’s career should be celebrated, but there are plenty of other places you can find those sorts of tributes. I would like to make this a bit more personal. Here are five reasons why Tim Duncan is my favorite NBA player ever.

1. Because Tim Duncan dressed like a man making minimum wage. I know this might seem inconsequential, but this aspect of Duncan’s personality made me smile. A lot. Here is a guy that has made over $200 million in his career, and he cared so little about being cool, that he dressed like someone that does all their shopping at Goodwill.[1. This is not a knock on Goodwill. I love Goodwill.] If you don’t know what I am talking about, then jump over here to see some of his more inspired outfits.

2. Because Tim Duncan was everything people said they wanted from an NBA player. I’ve spoken to numerous former NBA fans, people that have stopped watching at some point, and the takeaway from those conversations was simple: They were tired of the ball hogging, showboating, me-first players. They hated what the game had become: isolation ball, one-on-one offense, and players prancing and preening after any and every play. Tim Duncan was the antithesis of all that. He was first and foremost a team player. He consistently took less money to keep the San Antonio Spurs in a position to compete, year in and year out. He was all about the fundamentals of the game.
The perfect screen. The technically sound post moves. The unmatched defensive I.Q. He was soft spoken, if he spoke at all. He was never flashy and brash. He was never boastful. He was as low-key as you could get from an elite athlete who was at the top of his game. And he made liars out of all those people that claimed he was what they wanted. The Spurs were consistently a ratings disaster in the Finals. His jersey was never one of the top sellers in the league. He and the Spurs were commonly labeled as boring. If you truly cared about the game of basketball, the Spurs and Duncan were anything but boring.

3. Because even in retirement, he was always Tim Duncan. No fanfare. No retirement tour. No huge press conference. The Spurs did hold a press conference for his retirement–Duncan was not in attendance. There is a good chance that we may never see or hear from Duncan again after this week. In a world full of attention seekers, Duncan is a breath of fresh air.

4. Because of stats. I said in the intro that this was not going to be a typical Tim Duncan article detailing all of his accomplishments and statistical dominance. And it’s not. But I can’t write an article about Tim Duncan without at least touching on his many achievements. I’ll list them in nifty bullet points:

- Rookie of the Year
- 15 time NBA All Star
- 5 time NBA champion
- 2 Time NBA MVP
- 3 Time NBA Finals MVP
- 251 playoff games.[2. Out of 30 NBA teams, there are 18 active NBA franchises that have not been in as many playoff games.]
- Only player in NBA history to receive All-NBA and All-Defensive honors in his first 13 seasons.
His teams never missed the playoffs and never won fewer than 50 games except the 1999 season when they only played 50.

5. Because of this image:

When the Spurs beat the Miami Heat in 2014, it was one of the great moments I’ve had as an NBA fan. It was a glorious and impressive beat down. The Spurs played like a team that could do no wrong. If you watched that series you witnessed an offensive and defensive display like no other. At that point, Tim Duncan was clearly still the leader of the team. He was still the star. His skills were on the decline, but he was still a formidable player. Yet, due to how the series played out, Duncan did not need to play a lot of minutes and was not called upon to put up big numbers in the Finals. The stats were spread out all over the Spurs’ roster. But the key to the series was the emergence of Kawhi Leonard. Leonard kept LeBron James in check and added enough offense to win the Finals MVP.

Watching Tim Duncan celebrate Leonard’s award speaks volumes about who he was as a player and a teammate. That look of pure joy you see on Duncan’s face tells me everything I need to know about him. I can’t imaging most other star NBA players responding that way. Honestly, can you see Kobe Bryant smiling and celebrating like that for someone else? Can you see Michael Jordan doing that? Contrast Duncan’s response to winning his own Finals MVP with his reaction to a teammate winning and you will understand why the Spurs have been so good for so long. You will understand why his teammates loved him so much.
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Those words make me proud and sad at the same time. I’m proud that I was able to experience his great career as it happened. I’m proud that my children were able to see one of the best ever play the game the right way. I’m sad that we will never see him suit up again, take the low post, and bank in a beautiful jump shot. I’m sad that we may never see another player spend his entire career with one franchise, turning them into one of the great American Sports’ stories.

Tim Duncan has retired and the NBA has lost one of its great representatives. Thank you, Tim Duncan, for being the kind of player of whom I could be proud. Thank you for playing the game well, all the time. And finally, thank you for always being yourself, which means you won’t read one word that anyone writes about you and your career.