

The Great Debate

James or Jordan? LeBron or Michael? LBJ or MJ? This topic has been debated to death on talk radio, on podcasts, and in print. Michael Jordan is considered by many to be the best basketball player of all time. LeBron is the one current player who some think could challenge MJ for G.O.A.T. status. I believe the debate itself is a bit short-sighted since it completely dismisses other all-time greats like Kareem, Bird, Magic, Russell, and Chamberlain. Each of the guys mentioned in the last sentence, as well as MJ and LeBron, could lay claim to best-ever status. They all have countless great moments and statistical accomplishments that would bolster their case. They also have minor flaws that we could point out if we wanted to get nitpicky.

The Time Is Right

This article is about LeBron and Jordan though, and I think now is the right time to compare them. They both completed 15 seasons in the NBA so LeBron is at the same place in his career as Jordan was at his third and final retirement. They have each had 15 chances to win a championship, be the MVP, be an all-star, lead the league in scoring, or do whatever else great players do during the course of their career.

Let's Keep It Real

I will do my best to lay out the case for each guy and point out any factors that I think are important in this discussion. I have been watching basketball since 1982 so I have been a witness to both of their careers in their entirety. I can't stand hot takes so you won't find any here. If you are looking for an article that takes an EXTREME position or ignores all facts that go against a predetermined narrative you are in the wrong place. There are plenty of "experts" on Facebook and Twitter (not to mention Fox Sports, ESPN, or sports talk radio) that can provide that for you. I will also attempt to

avoid any recency bias and getting swept up with what is happening now while forgetting about the past. That is never a good thing and too many are guilty of it. At the same time, I am not a “get off my lawn” type person. We tend to idealize the past and overlook its flaws. The sport of basketball did not magically peak in 1986 and then go downhill from there. So if you are looking for someone who will say that everything and everybody was better in the 1980s you need to keep looking.

With that out of the way, let the comparison begin.

Rings Matter, But They Don't Tell the Whole Story

The more simple-minded among us would say that Jordan won six titles and LeBron won three, therefore Jordan is better. Case closed. It should be obvious that this is a very incomplete way to judge greatness in a team sport. Bill Russell won 11 titles. He is clearly the greatest if all we are doing is counting championships. Some may argue that Russell played in a different era so it is not fair to include him in this discussion. Robert Horry (a contemporary of both James and Jordan) won seven titles. I guess that makes him the greatest player of the modern (post-merger) era. No, no it doesn't. Titles are important and are definitely part of the equation, but they should NEVER be the single overriding factor when determining individual greatness in a team sport. This is not golf or tennis so let's stop pretending that it is.

Others argue that the fact that MJ was 6-0 in his finals appearances while James was 3-6 should settle the argument. This group is even dumber than the “championship counters” discussed in the previous paragraph. On what planet is making the championship round of your sport and losing somehow a lesser accomplishment than not making it at all? Continuing this flawed line of thinking it is better to be swept in the

first round of the playoffs (in order to preserve a perfect finals record) than to lose in game 7 of the finals! This makes absolutely no sense and I reject it out of hand.

You Play To Win the Game!

Winning does matter though, and great individual players in a sport like basketball should contribute to their team's success. To that end and because so many people are confused by this issue I have developed a simple scoring system to help inform our thinking on these types of debates. I call it the **REO Winning Scale™**. Jordan and LeBron are the ideal candidates to compare because they were both undeniably great and because both played 15 seasons (to this point). They also played their entire careers with a four-round playoff format which was introduced in the 1983-1984 season. Here is how the system works:

A player is awarded points for how far his team advances in the playoffs each season. Missing the playoffs altogether is worth zero points. In the NBA where 53.3% (this % was higher when Jordan played because there were fewer teams) of teams make the playoffs it is not a great accomplishment simply to make the postseason, so for a great player to miss out altogether is something of a failure. Losing in the first round is worth 1 point. Losing in the second round is worth 2 points. Losing in the conference finals is worth 3 points. Losing in the finals is worth 4 points. Finally, winning the title is worth 6 points. Titles do matter so a bonus point is awarded for that accomplishment.

Let's see how each player did in his career. First up is Jordan:

REO Winning Scale: Michael Jordan:

1984-85 - Lost in first round - 1 Point

1985-86 - Lost in first round - 1 Point

1986-87 - Lost in first round - 1 Point

1987-88 - Lost in second round - 2 Points

1988-89 - Lost in conference finals - 3 points

1989-90 - Lost in conference finals - 3 Points

1990-91 - Won NBA Title - 6 Points

1991-92 - Won NBA Title - 6 Points

1992-93 - Won NBA Title - 6 Points

1993-94 - Playing Baseball

1994-95 - Lost in second round - 2 Points

1995-96 - Won NBA Title - 6 Points

1996-97 - Won NBA Title - 6 Points

1997-98 - Won NBA Title - 6 Points

1998-2001 - Retired for three seasons

2001-02 - Missed playoffs - 0 Points

2002-03 - Missed playoffs - 0 Points

Total Score - 49 Points

Let's look at James now:

REO Winning Scale: LeBron James:

2003-04 - Missed playoffs - 0 Points

2004-05 - Missed playoffs - 0 Points

2005-06 - Lost in second round - 2 Points

2006-07 - Lost in NBA finals - 4 Points

2007-08 - Lost in second round - 2 Points

2008-09 - Lost in conference finals - 3 Points

2009-10 - Lost in second round - 2 Points

2010-11 - Lost in NBA finals - 4 Points

2011-12 - Won NBA Title - 6 Points

2012-13 - Won NBA Title - 6 Points

2013-14 - Lost in NBA finals - 4 Points

2014-15 - Lost in NBA finals - 4 Points

2015-16 - Won NBA Title - 6 Points

2016-17 - Lost in NBA finals - 4 Points

2017-18 - Lost in NBA finals - 4 Points

Total Score - 51 Points

By this measure, LeBron has a slight edge in terms of his impact on his team winning over the years. His **REO Winning Scale™** point totals will only go up as his career continues since he appears to not be slowing down or conceding anything to age. We must also acknowledge that Jordan retired briefly during his absolute peak and retired again at the very end of his prime. Those lost seasons would have almost certainly produced more playoff success and possibly even more titles.

Comparing Eras

Another factor to consider is that each of these players

played in at least two different eras of basketball. Jordan entered the league when scoring was high and the pace of play was fast. His rookie year the *average* NBA team scored 110.8 points per game. That season (1984-85) every single team in the league averaged over 100 points per game. By the time he retired the game had slowed down considerably and become more physical. Scoring was way down across the league. During his final season with the Bulls league-wide scoring was at 95.6 points per game and his final season with the Wizards saw scoring drop to 95.1 per game. LeBron came into a very slow paced and physical league, but the pace of play has increased dramatically in the last decade and scoring has as well. Watching a game from LeBron's rookie year compared to a game now is almost like watching a different sport. LeBron's rooking year saw team scoring at a near-record low of 93.4 points per game (the second lowest total in 60 years!). There were only two teams in the entire league that averaged over 100 points per game and four teams averaged less than 90. This season scoring reached a nearly 30 year high of 106.3 points per game.

We should also note that when Jordan played hard fouls were not discouraged the way they are now so players were physically more beat up. On the other hand, Jordan never had to deal with constant switching on defense or with zone defenses which were illegal at the time. LeBron has faced legal zones and much more sophisticated analytic based defenses for his entire career. I say all that to point out that one guy did not "have it easy" while the other had to "work for everything he got." Those who say such things are either very biased or willfully ignorant.

Competition Is Fierce, Until It Isn't

This analysis would be incomplete if we didn't compare the level of competition. Jordan entered a very deep and stacked

league. With a 16 team playoff field in a 23 team league it was easier to make the playoffs then, but harder to advance. For this reason, MJ went 1-9 in his first 10 playoff games and lost three series before he ever won one. As his career went on and his teammates got better he started winning more. The arrival of Jordan's prime coincided with the decline of the Lakers, Celtics, and Pistons dynasties that dominated the early part of his career. As those teams and players got older the Bulls took advantage. The league also expanded very rapidly in the late 80s and early 90s going from 23 to 29 teams. The talent pool was spread out and the league was watered down. In addition, many young players were going off the rails as the absence of a salary cap for rookies killed the incentive to get better. The mid-90s through early 2000s when Jordan did much of his winning was not a good time for the NBA in terms of style or quality of play. Jordan's Bulls were the primary beneficiaries of these events.

LeBron never was able to take advantage of excessive expansion as only one new team has been added in the last 20 plus years. He also played during the massive influx of excellent international players that was just getting started when MJ played. These international players increased the depth and level of competition around the league. Perhaps the biggest thing working against LeBron is that he had the misfortune of playing the latter part of his prime during the Warriors dynasty. He was able to beat them once in the finals, but one team with four of the top 20 players in the league is unheard of and considerably more difficult than anything Jordan ever faced in the finals. One benefit for LeBron is that he has been aided by playing in the weaker conference for his entire career so making repeated trips to the finals has been easier for him that it was for MJ.

Another way of to look at this is that Jordan faced tougher competition on his way to the finals, while LeBron has faced tougher competition in the finals. This would help explain why

one guy has more finals appearances, but the other has more finals victories.

Numbers Never Lie, But Do They Settle Anything?

I haven't spent a lot of time on individual stats because I don't think we will find any answers there. Look at these regular season numbers and you will see what I mean:

*MJ – 30.1 ppg 6.2 rpg 5.3 apg 2.3 spg 0.8 bpg .497 FG% .327
3PT% .835 FT%*

*LBJ – 27.2 ppg 7.4 rpg 7.2 apg 1.7 spg 0.7 bpg .504 FG% .344
3PT% .739 FT%*

In most categories, both guys got better in the postseason, which is not always the case even for all-star players. Their improved playoff statistics are just another testament to their greatness. Here are those numbers:

*MJ- 33.4 ppg 6.4 rpg 5.7 apg 2.1 spg 0.9 bpg .487 FG% .332
3PT% .828 FT%*

*LBJ – 28.9 ppg 8.9 rph 7.1 apg 1.8 spg 1.0 bpg .491 FG% .332
3PT% .743 FT%*

Jordan was a better scorer. LeBron a better rebounder and passer. This is true both in the regular and postseason. As he ages, LeBron's per game numbers will almost certainly go down (assuming he is human) while his name will climb higher on the all-time record book. After 15 seasons each though, the statistics for both the regular season and playoffs are incredibly close.

Haters Gonna Hate

As we wrap up this article I should be forthcoming and admit that I never really rooted for either guy. I was never a Jordan fan during his career. While I did root for him to finally win a title when they played the Lakers in 1991 (a lot of that was due to how much I hated the Lakers), I did not enjoy seeing him win throughout the 90s. I have never rooted for LeBron in any of his 9 trips to the finals. I don't hate his teams nearly as much as I did Jordan's Bulls, but I have always pulled for whoever his opponent was. I do recognize that both are all-time great players, so hopefully, my lack of fandom for either player will make me unbiased in this analysis.

Are We There Yet?

So where does this leave us? Each guy had a similar impact on their team winning as evidenced by their **REO Winning Scale™** scores. Both guys dealt with and conquered whatever the league threw at them in terms of style of play, pace of play, defensive rules, and physicality. They were both beneficiaries of certain peculiarities that were happening in the NBA during their careers, but they also had some bad luck in running up against all-time great teams that prevented them from winning as much as they could have otherwise.

My take is that at his peak Jordan is still the slightly better player. His ability to seize the moment and his more consistent shooting touch gives him the edge. It also helps that he has no black marks on his resume like James has from the 2010 and 2011 playoffs. Even when Jordan lost in a playoff series he still played well.

LeBron doesn't seem to be slowing down one bit though. He is now 33 years old and has been playing a full NBA schedule since he jumped straight from high school 15 years ago. Somehow he seems to be getting better as he ages. If he can continue to put up comparable numbers to what he has done so far in his career and make a couple more title runs this debate will need to be revisited.

Five Predictions For the 2017-18 NBA Season

The NBA regular season tipped off last week. The NBA has become a sport where the offseason gets more attention than the regular season. With all the blockbuster trades and huge free-agent signings, it is not hard to see why this is the case. Now we get to see how all those offseason moves will pan out. Last season I made five predictions about the NBA and somehow all five ended up happening. I was on cloud nine. My head grew to twice its normal size, I was invincible. I even considered flying to Vegas to put my skills to the test.

Thankfully the Vegas trip never happened. I contented myself instead, by making five NFL predictions for this current season. A couple of those NFL predictions aren't looking so

good this point and I have come crashing back down to earth. Apparently, I do not have the gift of prophecy.

Despite my recent failures I have decided to dust myself off and try again. What follows are five predictions for the 2017-2018 NBA season. Maybe I can recapture the magic from last year.

LeBron James will win the league MVP award. I think this will happen for a couple reasons. First, there seems to be a growing sentiment among sports media members that LeBron should win again. He has won the award four times, but his last MVP trophy was in 2013. He is still considered the best player in the world so many find it odd that he has not won this award in four years.[1. I would counter that the guys who have won the last four MVPs each deserved them.] The second reason I think LeBron will win is more practical. No matter how good Golden State is Steph Curry and Kevin Durant will take votes from each other. Russell Westbrook won last year, but his Thunder team added two all-star players so while the team should be better his numbers will almost certainly go down. The same can be said for last year's runner-up James Harden after the Rockets added a future hall of famer in Chris Paul. Other contenders may emerge, but, if he stays healthy, LeBron's team should win plenty of games and his numbers should be MVP worthy.

The Milwaukee Bucks will win a playoff series. Their last series win was in 2001 so it's been a while. That is all about to change though. With Giannis Antetokounmpo[2. AKA The Greek Freak] they have a top ten player in the league. He may be a top-five player after this season. He should be a household name already, but his name is so hard to say and spell it has held him back.[3. If his name was John Smith and he played for

the Knicks or Lakers you would be sick of hearing about him at this point.] He led the team in every major statistical category last season as a 22-year-old. The sky is the limit with this guy and they have built a decent team around him especially if Jabari Parker can come back from injury and regains his previous form. I expect 45-50 wins and a victory in the first round of the playoffs.

The Golden State Warriors will win 70 games this season. Only two teams in history have ever won 70 or more games in a season so to expect that out of the gate is a tall order. With the talent they have and the chemistry built by years of playing together 70 wins a real possibility. I don't think they will chase it like they did two seasons ago when they set the win record at 73, but it is hard to see them losing a lot this season.

Fewer players will sit out games due to rest this season. Despite criticism from some[4. Charles Barkley has apparently reached the stage in life where he complains about everything. Even decisions that make perfect sense. As a long time fan of his, all I can say is "You are better than that Charles!"] the league made a wise decision to spread the regular season out a bit. They are scheduling fewer games on consecutive nights and trying to avoid the dreaded four games in five nights stretches. This should mean coaches won't rest guys as often and it will be more likely that paying fans will get to see teams at full strength. If this works it is a win-win for everyone.

People will still complain when players do rest. I get the complaints, I really do. If someone pays the full price of a ticket only to find out that many of the players they came to

see are not playing that can be a real bummer. At the same time, I totally understand why coaches rest players.[5. I find it interesting that in baseball it is a completely accepted part of the sport that players will sit out games to rest during the season, but when NBA teams started doing the same thing it signaled the rapid decline of Western civilization.] Up until about two years ago, the only team that routinely rested healthy players was the San Antonio Spurs. The Spurs also happen to be the most successful NBA franchise of the past two decades winning five championships and being a legitimate contender every year since 1997-1998. It is not a surprise that other teams started copying their techniques and strategies. Even with the schedule changes, this issue won't go away. Coaches will rest guys during the regular season in preparation for the playoffs and sports talk show hosts and fans will complain.

There you have it. I would love to get your feedback on these predictions and hear what others think may happen this season.

Five 20th Century Sports Moments That Would've Blown Up Twitter

Imagine @FeuxBoPellini in 1992...

I love Twitter. During big events in the U.S. I've discovered (and tweeted) that the worse the event, be it a presidential debate or basketball game, the funnier Twitter is. I'm on Facebook to get people to pay attention to me. I'm on Twitter

to pay attention to other people.

So I also love it when a sports moment causes Twitter to explode. Like the LeBron block in the 2016 Finals. Or the last out of the Cubs World Series win. Or when Peyton Manning put Kevin Durant on blast at the ESPYs the other night[1. I don't know if I'm using this correctly, but I think it is a hilarious idiom that I try to work into every conversation with my wife these days. God bless her.].

And I've been thinking about moments before 2008 that would have caused the biggest Twitter meltdowns. Jordan's "I'm Back" in 1995 would be a huge one. Franco Harris' Immaculate Reception vs. Oakland has been replayed a billion times. Kirk Gibson's 88 World Series Game 1 home run certainly. And the list could go on and on.

And it would be endless. So instead of trying to narrow down this list, I want to write about a similar but distinct list. I want to write about moments that were not THE story, but were a footnote in reality yet still would have trended on Twitter. For fans like me, they are unforgettable. And just imagining the tweets that would have come from them brings joy to my mind. Here are five:

***The Major Story:* Dallas destroys Buffalo in Super Bowl XXVII 52-17, winning their first since the 70s and handing Buffalo their 3rd straight Super Bowl loss.**

***The Twitter Moment:* Don Beebe chases Leon Lett down from behind to prevent a meaningless TD at the end.**

This may be the loudest non-TD play in history for a game decided by 35 points. If you watched the game you remember it. Beebe instantaneously became a legend of team pride and hustle. He had no reason to keep running. The game was over. Lett became an instantaneous butt of jokes. He celebrated a

few yards too early. The only thing it meant historically was that Dallas didn't set the record for most points in a Super Bowl. Yet as far as fan reaction, it meant a ton. Beebe's and Lett's names would have been at the top of the trending list and I can see the "Hold My Beer" tweets in my head.

***The Major Story:* Larry Bird steals Game 5 of the 1987 Eastern Conference Finals from Detroit and the Celtics go on to win in 7 to set up Celtics vs. Lakers III.**

***The Twitter Moment:* Dennis Rodman and Isiah Thomas say that Larry Bird would be just another player if he weren't white.**

Racial (and racist) comments are aplenty on social media and with U.S. History being as it is, that will always be the case. So I have little doubt that when Rodman made this comment that Thomas echoed that it would have caused a race war on Twitter the same way politics and athletes like Colin Kaepernick do today. The NBA in the 70s and 80s was a breeding ground for racial strife and I remember when this happened. It blew up. Thomas had to answer for it repeatedly to the national media, including to Bird's face at an impromptu press conference. Imagine how Twitter would have reacted.

To be honest, while it was not the wisest comment to make I do believe Thomas was joking in some sense and it was completely overblown. You have to hand it to Bird, too. He told the media that he didn't think anything of the comment and that they shouldn't either.



The Major Story: Hakeem Olajuwon averages 32-11-5, dominates Shaq and Houston sweeps Orlando in the 1995 NBA Finals

The Twitter Moment: With under 10 seconds left in Game One and the score tied, Nick Anderson of the Magic misses 4 consecutive FTs.

Sports can make you a hero and a goat, often within the same time frame. Just a couple of weeks prior, Nick Anderson had a moment of glory, stealing the ball from Michael Jordan in a play that became an image of that series, the only one that Jordan lost as a Bull after 1990[2. Though it was the year he came back near the end.]. But then Anderson had a chance to give Orlando the lead late in the first Finals game and missed two free throws, got his own miss, got fouled again and missed the the next two. My brain tells me not to feel bad for professional athletes but my heart does. I can easily envision a slew of hilarious Michael Scott gifs in response.



The Big Story: In 1998, rookie Kerry Wood for the Cubs strikes out 20 Houston Astros, an MLB record, and holds them to 1 hit

in a dominant pitching performance

***The Twitter Moment:* The hit could have been ruled an error, giving Wood 20 K's AND a no-hitter in the same game, a feat that has never been accomplished.**

You can watch it below and make your own judgment and you can hear the announcers say it looked like an error. I agree. I was not a Cub fan yet, still 4 years away from moving to Chicago. And at the time I felt the same. I can only imagine the hours and hours of Twitter debate this would have sparked.

***The Big Story:* In the 1993 Sugar Bowl, underdog #2 Alabama romps defending champion #1 Miami 34-13.**

***The Twitter moment:* With Bama fully in control, the Tide's George Teague walks down Miami's Lamar Thomas and strips the ball.**

This is not like the Lett play to me. It is in some ways: the game was a blowout and a player got caught from behind. But it was the inverse of the play above and more than that, it was a statement. Alabama was given very little chance in this game. Miami was a 4-time champ and cocky. And Bama's defense destroyed them and their Heisman QB Gino Torretta. Here it finally looked like Miami would break the invincible Bama D and score a TD. And then Teague emasculated Thomas. The next we saw of Miami's trash-talking receiver, he was on the bench with a towel on his head. The play didn't even count but it absolutely encapsulates what happened that night. It would have brought a feast of tweets in reaction.

So, that's my list. What are some that I missed that you would have included?

Happy Birthday 'One Shining Moment': 30 Games for 30 Years

The ball is tipped, And there you are...

If you can hear music in your head when you read those words, this is for you. If you get chill bumps when you read those words and hear the music in your head, this is *definitely* for you.

The greatest playoff in American sports appropriately has the absolutely perfect song that has become associated with it for three decades now. I'm old enough to remember the first playing of One Shining Moment. That championship game is the first one I remember watching til the end. I've been through the David Barret version, the Teddy Pendergrass version, survived the Jennifer Hudson one year travesty and have thoroughly enjoyed the best of them all, Luther Vandross. What a song!

And so its 30th birthday has me feeling all nostalgic. Sports and highlight reel nostalgia are like peanut butter and jelly. March Madness and highlight reel nostalgia are like a Chick-fil-A sandwich and sweet tea.

With that in mind, I want to share 30 of my favorite One Shining Moments in the NCAA Tournament of the last 30 years.

The Game: 1987 Indiana v. Syracuse (Championship)

The OSM: I remember Keith Smart shooting it. I remember the body language of the Syracuse players after it was over. I remember the feels I got by seeing "One Shining Moment" make its premiere. It was like finding out about Christmas all over again: "So they can put the best highlights with this glorious music and give us three minutes of chill bump heaven!?!?" YES, LET'S DO THIS EVERY YEAR!

The Game: 1990 Loyola Marymount v. New Mexico St. (First Round)

The OSM: Bo Kimble, in tribute to his teammate Hank Gathers who died walking off the court the previous week, shot his first free throw left handed with 14:46 left in the second half. Why does this moment make me cry 27 years later?

The Game: 1990 UConn v. Clemson (S16)

The OSM: Any game where Clemson loses is a real treat to me, but this one was special because UConn was down 1 with exactly 1 second left. They had to go the length of the court. A-75 foot pass and Dick Stockton with the call: "The shot...YES! The shot's gonna count! The shot by Tate George...wins it!!!" Euphoria in my house ensued.

The Game: 1991 Duke v. UNLV (Final 4)

The OSM: "*Can Anyone Beat UNLV?*" That was the Sports Illustrated headline going into the NCAA Tournament. They were undefeated. They beat Duke by 30 in the championship the year prior. In their Final 4 rematch, Anderson Hunt hit a three on

UNLV's first possession and Christian Laettner came down and countered with a three. Laettner scored 9 points in the first three minutes as Duke opened up a 13-5 lead. That shot sent a message that Duke would not be blown out again. They went on to pull off an upset for the ages.

The Game: 1992 Ga Tech v. Southern Cal (2nd Round)

The OSM: A game that meant nothing really, it was pure exhilaration for a moment in time because James Forrest for Ga Tech caught a pass, down two, with 0.8 seconds left and pirouetted from 25 feet out and nailed it. Miracle shot.

The Game: 1992 Duke v. Kentucky (Elite 8)

I have visual images of this game seared into my brain. The hideous mustaches from Martinez and Farmer. The neck brace from Laettner's mom. I remember Laettner not missing a shot (10-10 FGs, 10-10 FTs). I remember him stomping Timberlake. I don't need Google to tell me that the guy for UK who hit the shot before Laettner's was Sean Woods. This game was like something out of a fantasy novel. The Final Shot is on the short list of greatest sports moments ever. Thomas Hill's reaction is almost as iconic as Laettner's shot itself.

The Game: 1993 Cal v. Duke (2nd Round)

The OSM: Duke was coming off back to back championships. Cal nipped LSU in the first round and LSU coach Dale Brown said "They don't have a prayer" of beating Duke. With just over a minute to go and Cal down by one point after leading basically the whole game and by 15 at one point, Jason Kidd (11 points, 10 rebounds, 14 assists, 4 steals) made an incredible circus shot from his knees and got fouled. He made the free throw, and Duke never led again.

The Game: 1994 Arkansas v. Duke (Championship)

The OSM: Grant Hill tied it with 90 seconds left with a three pointer. Scotty Thurmond, who used to practice by shooting threes over a broomstick, then made the tie-breaking three pointer over the outstretched arm of Antonio Lang that essentially won Arkansas the National Championship.

The Game: 1996 Purdue v Western Carolina (1st Round)

The OSM: Western Carolina Coach Phil Hopkins broke down and cried in the post game press conference, as his 16-seeded team had three shots to tie or win to try to become the first ever 16 seed to beat a 1 in NCAA Tournament history. It still hasn't happened.

The Game: 1996 Princeton v. UCLA (1st Round)

The OSM: UCLA, coming off their first national championship since The Wizard left, was a 4-seed and heavy favorite over Ivy League Princeton. But Princeton showed UCLA the exit "through the back door".

The Game: 1998 Kentucky vs. Duke (E8)

The OSM: A sweet, sweet revenge game. This time it was Scott Padgett with a the late game-changing shot, even if not as legendary as Laettner's. He broke the 81-81 tie with a three. I can still see his reaction in my head.

The Game: 1999 Gonzaga v. Florida (S16)

This was Gonzaga's coming out party, going from a 10-seed Cinderella all the way to the Elite 8 before barely falling to

eventual champ UConn. But what made this special, the third straight win for Gonzaga as an underdog, was Gus Johnson's call as it ended with Florida missing the potential game-winner: "Gonzaga!!!! The slipper...still...fits!!!!"

The Game: 1999 UConn v. Duke (Championship)

The OSM: By the Vegas gambling line, this is the biggest Championship game upset of my lifetime, even bigger than N.C. St over Houston in 83 and Villanova in 85. Duke just wasn't going to lose. But UConn went toe-to-toe with them and up by a mere point with 40 seconds left, point guard Khalid El-Amin made an acrobatic driving layup to break Duke's momentum. It was the difference.

The Game: 2001 Hampton v. Iowa St. (1st R)

The OSM: I was a Junior at Bible College on Spring Break and I plopped down in the guy's dorm lobby and waited all day for a great buzzer beater or upset. It finally came late afternoon. Iowa St., the 2-seed, was in complete control and led by double digits late in the game but Hampton came back and finally took the lead on an awkward looking hook by a big man named Johnson with six seconds left. The image of Hampton's coach being picked up from behind by a player as he kicks and fists pumps in excitement is one I'll never forget. At the time it was only the fourth time a 2-seed lost its first game.

The Game: 2005 Illinois v. Arizona (E8)

The OSM: Chicago got a little Illini fever in 2005 during their run to the championship game. But the Elite 8 game was the one to remember, as they were down 75-60 with just over four minutes remaining and the run was surely over. But they came storming back, and Deron Williams tied it with a three with 39 seconds left before they won in OT.

The Game: 2006 George Mason v. UConn (E8)

The OSM: An 11-seed mid-major beating a 1-seed Big Conference Giant to go to the Final Four? Just doesn't happen. My favorite part? Verne Lundquist's call after it ended: "By George the dream is alive!"

The Game: 2006 UCLA v. Gonzaga (S16)

The OSM: This was a truly special Madness finish. Gonzaga gave up a 9-point lead in the last few minutes with the nation's top scorer, Adam Morrison, breaking down a crying before the game was actually decided. Gus Johnson: "WHAT A GAME!! U-C-L-A!!! HEART. BREAK. CITY." I get chills. Every time.

The Game: 2007 Georgetown v. Vanderbilt (S16)

The OSM: I was pulling for Vanderbilt but this was a fantastic finish, with Vandy leading for much of the game but Georgetown pulling it out when Jeff Green scored the game winner at the final buzzer. It looked in real time like he traveled and I imagine some Vandy fans still think he did.

The Game: 2008 Kansas v. Memphis (Championship)

The OSM: So many story lines in this one. Memphis led by 9 with less than two minutes to go. And even up by 2 with the ball in the last 20 seconds, two made FTs by Derrick Rose would all but clinch it. All year Memphis was terrible at FTs and Calipari brushed it off. But they missed several down the stretch, including one by Rose here and gave Kansas a chance to tie. And Mario Chalmers hit perhaps the biggest shot in March Madness history, maybe behind Laettner.

The Game: 2009 N. Iowa v. Kansas (2nd Round)

The OSM: Kansas was looking good to repeat, with the overall #1 seed in the tournament. But 9-seed N. Iowa fought and had the lead in the final minute. And then a guy with a last name with like 14 consonants in a row forwent milking the clock and took an insane three with 37 seconds left that went in and sealed it. "YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS WITH THAT SHOT." (Dan Bonner)

The Game: 2011 Kentucky v. Ohio St. (S16)

The OSM: Just like the prior game, this one comes down to how the #1 team in the tournament lost well before it was supposed to. Diebler for OSU tied it at 60 with under half a minute left but Brendon Knight won it on an insane off balance jumper with a few seconds left. I jumped around my small Chicago apartment when this one went final. Not a Big 10 fan.

The Game: 2011 VCU v. Kansas (E8)

The OSM: OK, so George Mason pulled the 11 seed mid-major over College Basketball 1-seed Goliath five years prior. There's no way it could happen again. Right? But it did. Shaka Smart, VCU's coach, stole my heart this tournament. Against Kansas, they put on a clinic of dribble penetration and kick-out three-point shooting. Early in the first half Joey Rodriguez found Jaime Skeen on such a play to extend VCU's lead to 20-10 and you could feel the upset was possible.

The Game: 2012 Lehigh v. Duke (1st R)

The OSM: Duke used to never lose these games. A wide open dunk by a guy named Adams to extend the lead to 61-54 Lehigh with under two minutes left is a play I could watch over and over. That was the moment you felt it was going to happen: Duke was

really going to lose. "Absolute Madness!" (Jim Nance)

The Game: 2013 Wichita St. v. Ohio St. (E8)

The OSM: I was torn this game because Ohio St. winning would have nearly sealed me winning my church bracket competition. But I love the upset more. Ohio St. had cut a 20 point deficit down to 3 when Tekele Cotton for WS nailed a three as the shot clock wound down to make it 65-59. Ohio St. never got closer than four after that.

The Game(s): 2014 Kentucky v. Wichita St. (2nd R)

and also Louisville (S16)

and also Michigan (E8)

and also Wisconsin (F4)

The OSM(s): Yes, I'm grouping these games together. These were like quadruplets. It felt like the same game four times. The one Harrison twin made more clutch shots in this run than 99% of players in their careers. Every game was heart stopping. Every game was won in the final two minutes or final seconds. Nantz, after the one vs. Wisconsin to win it: "Aaron Harrison...Beyond Belief".

The Game: 2015 Georgia St. vs. Baylor

The OSM: R.W. Hunter, Jr. (the player) hit an improbable, deep three to win the game 57-56 for 14-seeded Georgia St. R.W. Hunter Sr. (the coach), fell off out his chair when he hit it. Classic game. Classic moment.

The Game: 16 Villanova vs. UNC (Championship)

The OSM: I don't need to say much. You saw it. Incredible back and forth game. Incredible UNC comeback from down 10 late in the second half. Incredible shot by Paige to tie it. Incredible shot to win by Jenkins. "DOUBLE ORDER! SAUTÉED!" (Bill Raftery)

So do me a favor...if you love this nostalgia, give yourself 15 minutes today and watch about five of the OSM videos. They are all on Youtube. My personal favorite? 2006, which you can watch [here](#).

Yay March! Go Gamecocks!!

“It Started With a Bunt”: The 2016 Sports Year in Review

It was such a crazy year in sports that I wouldn't be surprised to find out on Pottermore that the Chudley Cannons won the British and Irish Quidditch League Cup.

Okay, that will be my last Harry Potter comment. Because this year American sports proved yet again that truth will always be stranger than fiction. 2016 will go down as the most fascinating sports year ever and it's not even close. And I want to rehash the five main sports championships from this year in the big three sports, in chronological order:

You're Dixie's Football Pride, Crimson Tide

I suppose it's appropriate that in a sports year where significant droughts ended, that it started off with a winner that has now won four of the last seven College Football National Championships, could easily win a fifth in two weeks, and has been THE college football program for the last 80 years (No apologies to Notre Dame whatsoever).

Fireworks led 2016 that warm Monday night in January in Glendale, AZ. [I predicted Alabama would beat Clemson 31-30.](#) I was close on margin, but even I still can't accurately predict scores in college football because I grew up in an era where teams didn't regularly put up 550 yards and 40 points of offense in a game.

And the 45-40 barnburner was one of the most exciting games I've ever seen. I don't know if it's one of the best I've watched, but it had no shortage of plot twists, bold coaching and NFL athleticism on display. There were five TDs in the fourth quarter alone. Jake Coker got smacked around and still threw for 335 yards. Deshaun Watson had nearly 500 yards of offense by himself. Kevin Dodd was spectacular. O.J. Howard was magnificent. Nick Saban gets another jewel in his coaching crown for turning the game at 24-24 with a brilliant special teams call.

Clemson lost but they still won in some ways, knowing they can tell recruits that they are toe-to-toe with Bama and were an unprecedented onside kick away from likely winning.

Miller, Not Manning

As exciting as was the College Football Playoff championship, the Super Bowl was equally as ugly and boring. It featured one offensive TD drive and a gazillion punts. [I've already dealt at length with Peyton Manning's legacy](#) so I won't go into that here. Plus, it's not the story of the Super Bowl. Manning wasn't even mediocre in the game; he was bad. The man of the hour was Von Miller, who was supported quite well by everyone else playing defense for Denver. They trashed Tom Brady pretty good in the AFC Championship and carried the inept offense yet again in the Super Bowl. Harassing Cam Newton all night, it was Miller who bookended the game with two strips of Newton that lead to both of Denver's touchdowns.

While it was sometimes ugly, it is still a thing of beauty watching a defensive lineman or linebacker destroy an offensive line and disrupt everything. I grew up watching Lawrence Taylor and Reggie White do it and I have no doubt this was a part of the appeal of the movie *Waterboy*. Von Miller really did look like Bobby Boucher at times, so much that I fully expected him to ask Manning during the postgame if he remembered that time Von Miller showed up at half time and the Mud dogs won the Bourbon Bowl.

Still, the Super Bowl and NFL playoffs were captivating as always and gave us story lines galore. Yet I doubt anyone knew how much better 2016 was going to get.

One Shining Moment Was the Final Moment

I thought the 2016 NCAA Tournament produced a mixed bag. The first round featured the usual bevy of great upsets: 14 S.F Austin over 3 West Virginia, 12 Yale over 5 Baylor, 13 Hawaii over 4 Cal, and the biggest upset prize in first round

history: 15 Middle Tennessee St over 2 Michigan St. I personally think this was the biggest because no 2-seed that had ever lost in the first round had as much Final Four and Championship Contender hype as the Spartans. Plus, Michigan St. nearly always outplays their seeding. This was a bizarro world result.

The middle rounds induced tons of yawns, although Syracuse as a ten seed coming back to beat Virginia in the Elite Eight was a real treat and Villanova over Kansas that same round was intense. The two Final Four games gave us the biggest blow-out in Final 4 history (Villanova over Oklahoma by 44) and another blow-out (UNC over Syracuse by 17).

But then the championship redeemed it all. Villanova led UNC by 10 with about 5 minutes to go, 67-57, and I almost went to bed. But I thought about the dozens of times I've seen a college basketball team make up that deficit with that time and I stayed up. Boy am I glad I did. UNC came all the way back to tie at 74 with 4.7 seconds left on a double pump clutch three by Marcus Paige. That should have been the ultimate One Shining Moment, but it wasn't. Kris Jenkins then put his name in March Madness history next to Laettner, Jordan, Keith Smart and Bryce Drew with a way beyond NBA range 3-pointer at the buzzer to win.

"DOUBLE ORDER, SAUTÉED!"

Considering Laettner's shot was in the Regional Finals and Jordan's was with 17 seconds left, was this the biggest shot in tournament history? Time will tell[1. Spoiler: No shot will ever beat Laettner's.].

The Biggest Collapse since Shooter McGavin Blew a 4-stroke Lead on the Back Nine

Ok, so I'm not really serious about that. I just love this Gameday sign so much:



It was made as a parody reaction to how many times people had talked about Golden St. blowing a 3-1 lead to Cleveland in the NBA Finals.

I suppose you could call it a choke. There is a case for that. Golden St.'s record setting offense was erased for nearly the final five minutes of Game 7 (that's not hyperbole; they scored 0 points the last 4:37). GS had 13 points in the fourth quarter of Game 5 and 13 again in the fourth of Game 7. Harrison Barnes literally shot 9% from the floor (2-22) in Games 5 and 6. Draymond Green's suspension was in part due to his hot head.

Yet this somehow felt different in other ways. In the classic huge comeback debate—did one team win or the other team lose—it feels more like Cleveland won than GS lost. Love him or hate him, LeBron put together a stat line for the ages: 30-11-9 for points, rebounds and assists per game for the series. Nearly a triple double in an epic Finals. He added 2.6 steals per game and 2.3 blocks per game and if you are reading this I doubt I have to elaborate on the block heard round the world in Game 7. I will say this though: It's been six months

and I still don't think people overreacted to it, as we often do in sports any more. It was an instant legendary play worthy of its accolades[2. Credit has to go to J.R. Smith as well for forcing Iguadala to alter his layup].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N11oeH0Ihgg>

Then you have Kyrie Irving's three with 50 seconds to go. What a shot. Definitely the biggest since Ray Allen in 2013 and on the short list for biggest ever, since it was Game 7. And then you have to credit Cleveland's defense in the final three games. Now, I know some of you reading this will recall that there was (at least to some people) some shady refereeing at times during this stretch of games. I won't expound upon that too much, but I will say that people who know basketball best believe that Cleveland was getting away with some pulling and grabbing, especially on the perimeter[3. Yet you have to still credit Cleveland for getting away with it. Just like you have to credit Baltimore on San Francisco's final offensive play in Super Bowl XLVII for being aggressive and stopping the score. Cleveland did what they had to do defensively to shake up the Warrior's picture perfect offense.]

At the end of the day, the story is that a mega superstar forsook his home for greener pastures, humbled himself to come back and promised them a championship. And after 50+ years of failures in the big three sports—everything from fumbles to blown saves to getting torched repeatedly by Michael Jordan—the man delivered. Any other year LeBron James leading Cleveland in ending their 5-decade long title drought would be the runaway winner for story of the year. But 2016 wasn't like any other year.

The Eye of the Cubbie

The Cubs won the World Series this year. Let that sink in.



Take hours if you need. Days even.

Has it sunk in yet?

For me it has!



Yes, it happened. It really happened. I watched it. I felt the chill bumps. I cried the tears. I heard the car horns all

night.

How do you analyze this? Especially when you're a fan? Through memories I suppose. What memory will I cherish the most as being integral to the Cubs' 108-year in the making run to winning the World Series?

Was it finding out that Anthony Rizzo had the Cubs listen to Rocky music and quotes in the clubhouse after going down 3-1 in the World Series?

Was it the HR's by Fowler, Grandpa and Baez in Game 7?

Was it seeing Schwarber defy the odds and not only play in the World Series but deliver clutch hit after clutch hit?

No, I'm going with the bunt:

"The Bunt." That's what it should be called. It's not but it should be. The play of the playoffs to me. All the way back in Game 4 of the NLCS vs. the Dodgers, Ben Zobrist ended 21 innings of frustration for the Cubs offense (0 runs over 2+ games) by laying down a perfect bunt. The Cubs scored 4 that inning, won the game and didn't lose again in the series. Here is what I wrote on Facebook that night:



And yes, I think we Cubs fans will look back years from now

and be thankful as much for that 40 foot dribbler as any 400 foot HR. Zobrist would end up being World Series MVP and he made an MVP play that night.

The Cubs making and winning the World Series was so significant that I did Facebook Live, which I hadn't done before and haven't done since. But it was a truly unique event in the last century of American sports history.

And it made 2016 special. It is only fitting that the Cubs won with the help of Rocky, who to me is the greatest fictional underdog story of our time. And in a year where a European soccer team beat 5,000 to 1 odds to win the Premiere league, and where a man took the weight of an entire city on his shoulders and ended 50 years of sports Hades, it was only fitting that for the last championship be won by the Cubs. Who credited Rocky.

What will 2017 bring? Will the Detroit Lions win it all? Will Alabama finally lose? Will someone other than Golden St. or Cleveland make the NBA Finals? I Don't know. But next year has a hard act to follow. 2016 was incredible in the truest sense of the word. I'm glad I was alive for it.



Five predictions for the upcoming NBA season

(NOTE: This article was written before the start of the season, with the plan to run it on October 28th. None of these predictions are a reaction to anything that happened in the first few games of the season.)

It is October. Most sports fans (at least those in the Southeast where I live) are not thinking about basketball. They are focused on College and Pro football and maybe some playoff and World Series baseball. In Nashville, Predators Hockey is officially back and expectations are incredibly high this season. I understand this and if you choose not to read this article it is okay because at this point you have already clicked on it and we can count your page view!

Whether we are ready or not, the NBA season is upon us. The season officially kicked off on October 25th and I wanted to get some predictions in writing. By next June I will either look like a fool or a genius. Or maybe both. Here are my top 5 predictions for the 2016-17 NBA season. These are in order of how likely I think they are to occur. In other words, number 5 is the least likely and number 1 is the most likely to happen.

5. Russell Westbrook will win the league MVP this season. His numbers over the last two seasons were already MVP caliber. Without Kevin Durant he will have to take more of the load so his stats will be off the charts. The biggest question is whether or not the Thunder will have enough wins to put him in

MVP discussion. I predict they will and he wins the award.

4. James Harden will finish in the top 3 in assists this year.

Here is what we know about James Harden – He likes to dribble the ball, he likes to shoot the ball, he likes to drive to the basket and draw fouls, he hates playing defense and he has a magnificent beard. What remains to be seen is whether he actually enjoys passing the ball. His assist numbers have been solid in the past, but he has never been tasked with being his team's full time point guard and primary facilitator. It is on him this year to get everyone involved. Can he become less like Allen Iverson and more like Jason Kidd?

3. The Boston Celtics will make it to the Eastern Conference Finals.

Danny Ainge has done a great job of drafting young talent and getting rid of older players when they still had value. Adding Brad Stevens, one of the smartest minds in the game, as his coach was a huge move. This offseason they added an established all-star in Al Horford as a free agent. This team has a bright future, but the present is not too shabby either. The East is deeper than it was a few years ago, but Boston looks better than everybody outside of Cleveland.

2. During the playoffs someone will complain the league is rigged.

These complaints usually take two forms. First, the league is accused of wanting big market teams in the finals to increase ratings. I am sure the league does want higher ratings, but having the Spurs in the finals 6 times since 1999 is not the way to accomplish it [1. I love the Spurs and how they play the game, but it is no secret the ratings suffered when they made the finals.]. If the league is rigging the playoffs to get big market teams in the finals they are failing miserably. Second, some accuse the league of urging refs to call games in order to extend playoff series (especially the finals) to seven games. Once again, this theory make little sense. The fact remains, the finals have only gone to seven games 4 times since 1996[2. The 1950's and 60's was really the era of seven games finals. It happened 9

times in those two decades. I have always wondered if the league rigged the 1951 finals in favor of the Rochester Royals. Actually, I have never wondered this at all because I am not an idiot.]. During the 20 year span the finals are twice as likely to finish in four or five games as they are to go the distance.

1. During the season a former player will complain about the state of the league today. According to some, players today are not tough enough, competitive enough, don't shoot good enough, don't pass enough or don't play enough defense. If a player signs with a good team to try and win a title they are taking the easy way out. If they stay with a bad team it's because they don't want to win enough. If a game has a low score it's because nobody can shoot these days, if a game has a high score it's because nobody plays defense anymore. Things were so much better in the good old days and depending on who you ask the good old days took place in the 1990s, the 80s or the 60s[3. Nobody says the 1970s because half the good players were in the ABA and the other half were on drugs! I am exaggerating, slightly.]. These former players (and even some media members and fans) sound like an old man screaming at kids to get off his lawn. It is best to just stay on the sidewalk and try to not make eye contact. Eventually they will shut up.

There you have it. I tried to stay away from the easy stuff like picking Cleveland and Golden State to meet in the finals again or predicting Greg Popovich to be rude to a sideline reporter. Go ahead and bookmark this page, you can come back and read it next year to see how I did. As always feel free to comment below.

Welcome to Sports Week

In my experience it is rare for people who are passionate about literature like *The Lord of The Rings* and its films, and who feel strongly about *Star Wars* and *Marvel* and *DC*, to also really get into sports. But this is one thing that makes *Rambling Ever On* unique. The eclectic tastes of its contributors are not merely tastes as much as passions and those that write for the site are as passionate about sports as much as anything.

And even within that broad topic, you will find very specific areas of expertise. The Lytle brothers are deep into the NFL and NBA. Mark Sass and Nathan Patton adore baseball and care strongly about two rival teams, the Cubs and Cardinals respectively. Nathan, Ben Plunkett and Josh Crowe all really get into the Olympics. Brandon Atwood and I (Gowdy) both hail from college football states where the love for the local teams is irrationally intense. Josh and Brandon even love soccer! How crazy is that?!? (I'm not sad to say, though, that we do not have any soccer articles).

So seeing as how we have from the outset of our relatively young site determined to write about what we know and love, sports have come up often. Even our guest contributors have helped add depth to our sports coverage. One particular day back in April we had articles with football, basketball, baseball and hockey all on our front page.

So this week, as the Olympics have wound down and as the baseball pennant races get a little hotter and as football makes its way back into dominating public consciousness, we at

REO will highlight sports in our article production. Some of what we put out this week will be previously published material, but worth rereading or just reading if you missed it the first time. Some will be new. But it all will come from a place of knowledge and love of the games. So whether you are a pro fan or a college fan or just that type that loathes sports normally but gets into when nations are involved, sit back, relax and enjoy some strong opinions. And comment if you like, even if you disagree! We welcome vigorous yet healthy debate. Its one of the things we here at REO do best.

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 imagine 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.

Tim Duncan has retired.

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.

5 Stories On Why Larry Bird Was the Greatest

"When I played, Larry Bird was the only one I feared. A lot of black guys always ask me, 'Did Larry Bird really play that good?' I said, 'Larry Bird is so good it's frightening.'"
[Magic Johnson]

Every NBA subplot this year – the Warriors 73 wins, Kobe's retirement, the current playoffs – has proven there is one incontrovertible fact about professional basketball: people go bonkers if you put anything other than "Jordan" next to "Greatest". I know, I know. My opinion is minority. I don't care. I have watched the NBA like a hawk for over 30 years and Larry Bird and Magic Johnson are 1A and 1B for greatest ever. For all sorts of reasons, like how both could control a game without taking a shot. I'd put Jordan 3rd and I'm sure that renders my opinion void to many, but that doesn't bother me. That's how I see it.

This isn't an article about statistics. For the big three of points, rebounds and assists per game, Larry Bird was a career 25-10-6 player. He consistently shot 50% from the field, 40% from three and 90% from the line. He took a 29 win team and made them a 61 win team in his rookie year. This isn't about putting his career accomplishments in the right context. All of his career stats are affected by the years at the end of his career when his back was done. By his own words, people told him he would cut his career short because he would not stop diving for loose balls. But Bird would not change the way he played. (Another reason why he's the greatest). He could have easily twice as many championships if he gotten to play Shawn Kemp in the Finals instead of the Kareem/Magic/Worthy Lakers. Or if Len Bias hadn't died. Or if he would have

stopped diving for loose balls.

But Bird was much more than statistics and facts. He was stories. Stories that prove how rare a talent he was. Stories that prove he was, as Kenny Smith told TMZ one time, the best trash talker ever. Stories that prove he was a killer from Day One in the NBA and didn't need six years of losing (because Bird was never on a mediocre or losing team) to develop that reputation. I could tell a thousand of these and I hate to leave any out. I could tell of the time he scored 20 on 9-10 shooting in the fourth quarter vs. Atlanta in Game 7 of the 87 Eastern Conference semis to out-duel Dominique Wilkins. Or the time he outscored Dr. J 42-6, which sparked a fight between the two. Or the time he got bored on a road trip in Portland and scored 27 points through three quarters *shooting with his left hand*[1. For good measure, he went back to his right hand in the fourth and finished with 41 points and a triple double.]. Or the time he walked into the locker room of the first ever three-point shooting contest and said to his competitors, "Which one of you ladies is finishing second?" before he proceeded to win that year and the next two years[2. The following year fellow participant Dale Ellis said Bird was quiet before the competition. Bird's response: "There was no need to talk. We all knew who was going to win."]. But those stories can wait for another day. Magic used to say that on the basketball court, he feared no one. Except Larry Bird. These five stories capture that greatness to me like no others.

5. The Concussion Comeback

Towards the end of his career, Bird was a mess of injuries. He would wear a back brace at night when he slept, get up and go to practice or to the game, and then come home and put on the back brace again. In 1991, the Celtics were tied 2-2 in a five game first round series with the Indiana Pacers. The night before Game 5, Larry Bird spent the whole night in the hospital due to pain in his back. But Larry would have played

in a wheel chair if he to, so he was in the line-up. Just before halftime, Bird made a bad pass that got stolen and in an attempt to save the ball he dived on the floor but slipped and slammed his head in the Garden parquet floor. He was diagnosed by the team trainer with a concussion and was told his night was over. With Bird out, Boston got down in the 3rd quarter to the Pacers. The players were dejected and the crowd was restless. But Bird defied orders and when the trainer turned his back, walked out of the training room and back onto the court. Like the Calvary. The crowd came alive. The mood in the building shifted. And with 32 points, Larry Bird led the comeback to win the series[3. I have all the respect in the world for Michael Jordan. But this is why the Flu Game (which was more accurately 'flu like' symptoms) doesn't impress me that much. Bird never did things like fall into the arms of a teammate dramatically to show the world his pain. Bird just played without all the hysterics.].

4. Calling himself and his teammates a bunch of 'Sissies'

Bird didn't enjoy the limelight and was a man of few words in the media. But when he did speak, what he said had potency. And after enduring an epic 33-point Finals massacre in Los Angeles in Game 3 of the Finals in 1984, Larry didn't mince words. He said he and his teammates played like a bunch of women. And this is part of what made Bird such a great player and leader. Instead of being offended by this, his team responded to having their manhood challenged. McHale clotheslined Goggles Rambis. Cedric Maxwell taunted James Worthy with a choking symbol. Bird didn't just talk it, he walked it by getting in Goggles Abdul-Jabbar's face at one point and shoving Michael Cooper unnecessarily on an in-bounds play. These things changed the tone and the direction of the series completely, as Boston forced overtime just one game after being blown out. And for good measure, Bird nailed the clutch shot of the game, breaking a 125-125 tie in the final minute of OT, which proved to be the winning shot. The Celtics

won the series for their second championship in four years.

3. The Xavier McDaniel Game-Winner

Xavier McDaniel tells this story with a sense of awe, which is what makes it so good. Bird was notorious for telling guys he was going to shoot it in their face and then doing it, but no one has a version quite like this one.

Boston was tied on the road at Seattle late in the game and Boston called T0. Celtics coach K.C. Jones called a play for Dennis Johnson but Bird nixed it in the huddle[3. As it's told by Jones, he told them the play was for DJ and Bird said, "No. Give it to me and tell everyone to get out of the way." Jones said, "Larry, you play. I'll coach." And then said, "Okay, we're giving it to Larry and everybody get out of his way."]. He determined he would get the ball. When they broke the huddle, he walked up to McDaniel, who was guarding him and said, "I'm getting the ball. And I'm going to shoot it right here in your face and win this game." And then the play happened, Bird got the ball and shot it in the same exact spot he told McDaniel he would and made it, exactly as he told McDaniel he would. And won the game. And McDaniel says Bird looked at him as if to say, "I didn't mean to leave 2 seconds on the clock."

2. "The Steal."

Isaiah Thomas is one of the greatest point guards in NBA history and was good at making decisions and coming through in the clutch. But in Game 5 of the 1987 Eastern Conference Finals vs. Boston, he had a chance to seal the game with a simple inbounds pass after Bird had lost the ball out of bounds with five seconds left. And Thomas did inbound the ball, making a simple pass to a wide open Bill Laimbeer just a few feet away from the Boston basket. But out of nowhere, like a superhero, Bird flew in and stole the pass and assisted to Dennis Johnson for the winning bucket. I've watched this play

a million times and you can clearly see Bird break on the pass before Thomas threw it. That was Larry Bird in a nutshell. He was the Mentalist on the hardwood, two or three moves ahead of everyone else[4. James Worthy once stated that he'd rather guard Michael Jordan than Bird for this reason.]. Teammate Danny Ainge would say years after the game, "They forgot about Larry Bird."

1. Setting the Garden record with 60 points.

Kevin McHale scored 56 points to break the Boston Garden record in 1986. Larry Bird immediately predicted the record would fall[5. This is how I know Bird could have averaged 35 PPG for a season or 30 for his career. He was too unselfish. Except this one time.]. And less than two weeks later, Bird went out and scored 60 vs. the Atlanta Hawks on an array of shots that has to be seen to be appreciated. The story from that night is that Larry was so hot, he was calling his shots every time down the floor, taunting the helpless Hawk players trying to guard him ("glass," "from the wing," "Where do you want this one?" etc.) and near the end of the game called "from the trainer's lap." And he came down and got fouled about 27 feet from the basket, threw the ball up, the shot went in and he fell in the trainer's lap—on purpose—on the sidelines[6. The shot didn't count, but it was real and it was spectacular.]. Cameras caught two Atlanta players, Cliff Levingston and Eddie Johnson, going nuts in amazement on the bench after that play, standing up, high-fiving, laughing, because they could not believe what they had just seen[7. Hawk players say that Atlanta coach Mike Fratello called a team meeting after the game to show the video of the two guys celebrating over and over and then to reprimand them for cheering for the other team. He fined them both \$500.]. To quote Quinn Buckner, Bird's teammate in Boston at the time: "Larry was so good that night, *the Hawks were giving each other five.*"

So if you give me one pick to start a basketball team of any

era, I will go with Bird. Not even a question. Because not only would have the greatest player ever, I'd have the greatest stories to tell.