

# The Great Debate: Jordan vs. LeBron

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.

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### **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.

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## **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.

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## 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.

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## **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.

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## **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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## **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.

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**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.

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**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.

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**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.

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**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.

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**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.

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

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## **Fool's Gold: Are the Golden State Warriors the Most Overrated Team of All Time?**

The 2016-2017 Golden State Warriors are champions of the basketball world once again. This is their second title in three years, having defeated LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers both times. They went 16-1 in the playoffs which is the highest post season winning percentage in the history of the NBA. By every conceivable measure they appear to be a

great team.

Unless you ask other NBA players.

Charles Barkely, Scottie Pippen, Rasheed Wallace, Robert Horry, Julius Irving, and Magic Johnson have all had less-than-kind things to say about this Warriors' team. All of them have publicly questioned their greatness, insinuating that they are the product of a watered down, less talented and more easily exploited league.

We here at Rambling Ever On decided to take a closer look into this controversy. What is it about this Warriors' team that causes all of these former (and current) players to withhold praise, or worse, to openly doubt? We have done our best to get a good sampling of reaction from various NBA players who have played in different eras.

We started our investigation with the players from the 80's and 90's, since they seemed to be the most vocal in their criticism. Craig Ehlo, a former Cleveland Cavalier from the 80's and 90's, noted "I have no doubt we'd take them. 5 games at most. We didn't win the championship but the league was tougher back then. And with the new rules Mark Price would hit 22 threes a game, minimum. Between me, Wilkins and Price, we'd have the Splash Triplets. Curry would ride the bench in the 90's NBA."

Patrick Ewing, Hall of Fame center for the New York Knicks bristled when asked if the current Warriors are better than the 1996 Chicago Bulls. "Man, we played those Bulls' teams! They were great. Best ever. And we played them close. These pretty boys from Oakland would be crying on the court if they had to play me, Mason and Oakley. We sweep them or they would give up. Whichever comes first."

It appears there is a level of skepticism about the Warriors. We dug deeper.

Michael Olowokandi, the number one pick in the 1998 draft has also recently spoken out. "I'm confident the 99 Clippers would take these Warriors. I know I only averaged 8 points per game for my career, but the league was tougher back then. Draymond Green wouldn't be able to touch me. I'd go for 30 every night."

The skepticism and verbal attacks are not reserved for players from the 80's and 90's. NBA players from every decade are stepping up and taking their shots at Durant, Curry and the Warriors. Fred Carter, the leading scorer on the 1973 Sixers had some choice words.[1.The 1973 Sixers went 9-73 – the worst record in NBA history.] "Back when I played, there were only 17 teams in the league. There are 30 teams today. Obviously that has watered down the league. And we didn't have any of those European players. Those guys should just stick to soccer." Carter continued, "We didn't have the three point shot in my day either. It didn't exist. If it had been around, I am confident that at least half of my team could have shot it at least as well as Stephen Curry. Probably better."

Fred "Curly" Neal of the Harlem Globetrotters added his own perspective. "Those guys are fancy. They dribble, they drive, they shoot from anywhere on the court. But we did all those things and we did them better. We looked better as well, you know what I'm saying? Don't give me that 16-1! The Globetrotters won 8,829 games in a row!"

Surely, we thought to ourselves, that at the very least, the current players would have a healthy respect for a team that has won 207 regular season games and two NBA championships in the past three seasons. So, we approached LeBron James, arguably the great player of his generation, to get his thoughts. James was thoughtful and political with his response, yet with enough negativity it was clear the questions about the Warriors extends beyond the older generations. "Well, they were a great team. No doubt. But they played in an era that honestly didn't have a lot of great

teams. And their style of play worked for them in that era but would not be as effective against the great teams of other eras.” We asked James if his Cavaliers team would beat the Kevin Durant led Warriors in a seven game series. LeBron smiled, “Absolutely. Our team could defend the perimeter which would have contained Curry and Thompson. We would have neutralized Durant completely. Our teamwork and passing would have made it impossible for their defense to key on any one player. And defensively, we played a physical and aggressive style that would have knocked them off their game. We would have won that series in 5, maybe 6 games.”

There you have it. The Golden State Warriors, who set the NBA record for the most regular season wins in a single season AND over a three year span, winners of two NBA championships, are just not very good. In fact, ask any player, past or present, besides Dell Curry and Mychal Thompson, and they would tell you that pretty much any team that has ever played in the NBA could beat these guys. Even some great college teams could probably give them a good run for their money. In fact, there have been rumors that members of the 1995 College of Charleston Cougars are saying they believe their team could also defeat the Warriors in a 7 game series, but none of them could be reached for comment.

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## **Why I Stopped Hating LeBron James**

I remember the Summer of 2010 quite well.

Especially July. My church puts on a huge basketball camp every summer and a church from another state always comes to



help us with it, normally the Rejoice Church in Owasso, OK. I remember being at the church one day working and then several of their adult workers gathering around the church soundbooth computer with me to watch "The Decision."

I remember my reaction to it: anger, confusion, repulsion. It was the same kind of reaction I'd have to a TV show that killed off my favorite character. I honestly didn't care that LeBron left Cleveland. I wanted him in Chicago but not choosing us didn't really draw the ire. No, I was mad because LeBron chose to play with Dwayne Wade, four years removed from a Finals MVP and Chris Bosh, a perennial all-star.

Then, it got worse. I was housesitting for a lady at church and happened upon the Miami Heat pep rally celebrating *before the season had even started*, complete with the new Big 3 all in full uniform and LeBron predicting they'd win championship after championship.

I was disgusted. When the regular season finally started three months later, I was in full "I hate LeBron" mode (not real hate, but what I call "sports hate" – just a fun way to say I don't like them). I know I will never hate an athlete as much as I hate Tom Brady but he was becoming a sort-of NBA version.

So when Miami made the Finals every year from 2011 to 2014 I watched every second as though my life depended on it. I cheered Dallas' victory and gloated like a child to anyone who would listen. I blamed Harden and the refs for the 2012 Miami win. I thought they were finished again in 2013 in Game 6 until that unforgettable last minute. But at least I got to enjoy immensely the Spurs getting revenge in dominating fashion the next year.

One thing was sure though: Every year he was in Miami, I wanted LeBron to go down like I wanted Shooter McGavin in *Happy Gilmore* to go down.

But what he did after the 2014 season undid it all. He came back. And more importantly he gave his reasons, beautifully written, for coming home to Ohio. I was blown away. By it all. [By how thoughtful and honest the essay was](#). By the humility to forgive Dan Gilbert for all that he said after LeBron left. By the willingness to go back to an awful basketball franchise and try to win it all for the people. By the love for his home outside of basketball. By owning up to “The Decision” so we all could move on from it. Even by the inspirational Nike commercial he did with the city of Cleveland to give them an unforgettable way to celebrate his return. It was all admirable.

It was all so opposite of 2010. As many journalists have written, there is no reason to hold on to those two nights in July any longer. He cannot undo them. All he can do is move forward. And that is exactly what he’s done, with incredible life maturity. It reminds me of the way Jack and Sawyer changed on the TV show *Lost*, except it wasn’t scripted. It was raw and genuine.

So watching him pull Cleveland from Basketball Hell these last three years has not bothered me at all. It was the circumstances I hated in Miami, far more than the man. I was disappointed that Cleveland won it all last year, but solely because of Mike Lytle’s [article](#) on Golden State being better than the 96 Bulls. (Hey, what can I say? I’m a bigger fan of REO than any NBA result.) But a small part of me cheered that Cleveland finally won something. It was absolutely perfect that LeBron—being born in Akron, drafted by his hometown team, having forsaken them and then having returned with contriteness and realness you rarely see in professional athletes—was the one to lead them. If you juxtapose LeBron’s [“Together” Nike video](#) with the result of Game 7 from last year’s NBA Final, it feels like a superhero movie became real life.

I have opinions on LeBron as an athlete as far as his legacy

but those comments can wait for another article (or you can just look at my Twitter feed). But no matter how much I argue for or against him, none of it comes from the same extreme hatred I have for athletes like Tom Brady. What Lebron did three years ago is too special to me. It was significant way beyond sports. And as a human, more than a sports fan, I loved it. I'll never be a Lebron fan, but I'm not a hater either. I feel like he has earned that much.

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## **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 25<sup>th</sup> 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 side walk 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.

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## Poll: The Greatest NBA Player of All Time

LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers are the NBA champions. This is LeBron's third title, firmly placing him in some elite company. The question is, has he done enough, accomplished enough, to be considered the Greatest of All Time? **The G.O.A.T.** That is very much up for debate. Here at Rambling Ever On, we pride ourselves in our ability to create [Top Ten lists](#). And we considered doing that for this conversation.[1. Spoiler alert: We are going to do that eventually.] We thought it would be more fun if we got our readers involved. Do Bill Russell's 11 championships put him at the front of the line? Do Michael Jordan's six NBA Finals MVP's give him an edge? Does Larry Bird get your vote because he is the [greatest](#) ever?[2. Kidding...maybe...] Does LeBron get strong consideration because of what he just accomplished a few days ago and we lack the ability to see the greater historical context of any current event?


So, the proverbial ball is in your court. Below, you will find a poll with ten NBA greats and one option for “other.” You pick your top three. Not one. Not two. **Three**. If your choice is not represented in the ten names we came up with, please pick “other” and tell us in the comments who you chose. If you can’t follow these simple directions, then you are just the worst.[3. Just kidding. You are pretty lame though.] Our preference would be for you to comment below with the three players you picked, but we understand if you don’t have time to do that.[4. We want you to tell us whom you picked so we can either agree with you or make fun of you.]

Let’s do this thing!

### Who is the greatest NBA player of all time?

- Bill Russell
- Wilt Chamberlain
- Kareem Abdul Jabbar
- Magic Johnson
- Larry Bird
- Michael Jordan
- Shaquille O'Neal
- Tim Duncan
- Kobe Bryant
- LeBron James
- Other

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# 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.

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## 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.

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# Are the 2016 Golden State Warriors the Greatest NBA Team of all Time?

*(Editor's note: We are running this article again, nearly a month after it was first published, because Golden State is going for the all-time regular season wins record tonight. If they win it all this year, we will most likely trot it out again at that point. Because it makes us look smart...or at least it makes Michael look smart and we want to live vicariously through that.)*

In 1996 the Chicago Bulls completed the greatest season in NBA history. They went 72-10 in the regular season to break the all time wins record. They followed that up with a 15-3 playoff record and their fourth title of the decade. Their title run included a sweep of the Orlando Magic in the Eastern Conference Finals. This was the same Magic team that eliminated them from the playoffs in 1995. Many consider the 1995-96 Bulls to be the best team in NBA history. Even though it may seem blasphemous to some, I contend that the current Golden State Warriors team would beat that Bulls team in a 7 game series.

But before I get to my reasons I need to disclose a couple biases:

- First, I am not a Michael Jordan fan. I rooted against him for most of his career. I acknowledge that he is a great player; maybe even the greatest of all time. He had more huge playoff moments than anyone else and it is hard to criticize anything about his game. Even so, I find it annoying how many fans and even some media members today seem to think that he never lost a game and quite possibly never even missed a shot. He was

human and actually did NOT win the title in 9 of the 15 seasons that he completed. I know that will come as a shock to some so I will give you some time to recover.

- Second, I like 2016 basketball better than 1996 basketball. The golden age of the NBA was the 80s and early 90s. By the mid-90s, all the way until the mid-2000s, the league had become much more physical. Teams fouled a lot more and were able to get away with it. Other teams attempted to slow down the pace of the game by using up the entire shot clock. Fast breaks were down as well as scoring and excitement. The 90s was also the era before the rookie salary cap was instituted. Unproven players were getting huge long term contracts and their incentive to improve was greatly reduced. Does anyone remember Glenn "Big Dog" Robinson demanding 100 Million dollars before he would agree to play a minute in the NBA? With a couple of rule tweaks to help the product on the court, the addition of a rookie salary cap and shortened contract lengths, the league has been steadily improving for the last decade.

Time's up. Back to the article:

So why do I think the Warriors would win? First, the Warriors have perfected the pace and space style that has taken over the modern NBA. In 2004, The NBA put in restrictions on hand checking on the perimeter. This allowed small and quick guards to move more freely and offenses to be more effective. It was a great and much needed rule change. The Phoenix Sun's were the first team to really take advantage of it this change. Under Steve Nash they made several deep playoff runs from 2004-2010. Still, they never had a great defense and were never able to win a title. The San Antonio Spurs, who had won several titles with a more traditional style, realized that they needed to adapt to the new rules with a more up tempo style. So they started playing faster, shooting more threes and passing it much more around the perimeter. Their changes

worked and they made back-to-back finals in 2013 and 2014. They won it all on their second trip after crushing the Miami Heat in the finals. The Warriors have taken this style to another level. They shoot threes more and at a better rate than anyone has ever done before. They run, run and then run some more. They pass the ball early and often. They play small lineups that allow them to be quicker and space the floor more. They went 67-15 in the 2014-2015 season and won the title. They are even better this year and on pace to break the Bulls record for wins in a season. In other words, they play this style better and more effectively than any team in history. You won't beat them by trying to out run or out shoot them so teams need to try something else.

The logical move would be to go big to combat their ultra-fast small ball lineups. This might work for some teams with great big men. Unfortunately, the 95-96 Bulls were not one of those teams. Their starting center was Luc Longley. He might be the least scary Australian ever. Their starting power forward was Dennis Rodman. He is an all-time great rebounder, but at that point in his career did nothing on offense. Their big men off the bench were the immortal Bill Wennington and 187-year-old James Edwards. Nobody was afraid of the Bulls' big guys and the Warriors would run circles around them if they tried to go big.

Another tactic would be to play the Warriors physically. If the refs allowed the Bulls to get away with holding, grabbing, tripping and similar tactics, they might be able to beat the Warriors. Ironically, this was the same strategy that the Bad Boy Pistons and the Pat Riley Knick teams used against Jordan and the Bulls. Sometimes this strategy worked, but other times it did not. Jordan complained about this type of play constantly (and with good reason) so it would be sad if he had to stoop to the same strategy that he despised.

I don't want to make this article all about statistics, but we need to look at a few to see if my theory has merit. The Bulls

scored 105.2 points per game (PPG) and allowed 92.9 PPG while the Warriors score 115.6 PPG and allow 104.6 PPG. The easy conclusion would be that the Warriors have a better offense and the Bulls have a better defense. This may be true, but a big reason for these numbers is that the Warriors play at a much faster pace than did the Bulls. When we compare the teams to the rest of the league we see the Bulls were number one in offensive efficiency and number one in defensive efficiency in 95-96. This is remarkable and just shows their greatness. The Warriors are also impressive with the number one offense and number six defense this season. Both teams outscore their opponents by over 11 points per game, which is a very strong indicator of their greatness. The Warriors are accomplishing all of this without a single player on the team averaging over 35 minutes a game. In other words, they are blowing a lot of teams out and resting their starters in the fourth quarter quite a bit. If they kept their foot on the gas by playing starters more minutes, who knows how badly they would be outscoring their opponents. The Bulls did have two players that averaged over 35 minutes per game. The conclusion I take from all these numbers is that statistically speaking these teams are pretty even.

Now, let's look at the rosters. The Bulls started Ron Harper at Point Guard, Jordan at Shooting Guard, Scottie Pippen at Small Forward, Rodman at Power Forward and Longley at Center. The Warriors start Steph Curry at PG, Klay Thompson at SG, Harrison Barnes at SF, Draymond Green at PF and Andrew Bogut at Center. Jordan and Pippen had a clear advantage at their positions while Curry and Green had the advantage at their spots. But in the case of Curry vs Harper it is a HUGE advantage for Golden State. I would argue that Bogut is definitely a better all-around player than Longley although neither guy is essential to what their team did/does. The Bulls had Tony Kukoc and Steve Kerr as an excellent duo off the bench, but beyond that their bench was made up of very limited, one-dimensional role players. The Warriors go at

least ten deep with multiple guys that have started or would start now for many other teams. The Warriors are also younger and more athletic than the Bulls team so in terms of roster I give a slight edge to the Warriors.

Looking at coaching the edge has to go to Chicago. Steve Kerr, the Warriors coach, appears to be headed for legendary status. He played for two of the greatest coaches in league history, but he has a long way to go to be in the same stratosphere as Phil Jackson. Advantage Bulls.

After looking at style of play, match-ups, roster composition, coaching and statistics the teams appear to be pretty even. If they played in a series I would expect it to go the distance and come down to a memorable game 7. My main reason for picking the Warriors (besides the fact that it makes for a more interesting article) is their superior depth. Golden State has at least five players between 6'4" and 6'8" that are athletic and versatile defenders. They would make things just difficult enough for Jordan and Pippen to keep these games close and enable Curry's otherworldly shot making to seal the deal.

Ultimately it does not really matter though because the 1986 Celtics would beat either of these teams. But that is another article for another day! Golden State may not break the wins record. They may not even win the title this season. The Spurs or Cavs could both beat them in the playoffs. Steph Curry could hurt his ankle tomorrow and derail their title hopes. However, I expect them to both win the title and break the all-time wins record. By accomplishing these two feats they will put themselves in any discussion of the greatest team of all time. They are already on the short list for most entertaining team of all time.