

The Greatest Basketball Player of All Time: LeBron vs. Jordan

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Abstract

LeBron James is one of the greatest athletes of this generation. I am seeking to determine what he needs to do to surpass Michael Jordan as the greatest of all time. Considering individual statistics, team success, and personal achievements as well as factors such as political and racial activism and involvement, media coverage (including social media), and generational difference, I am hoping to show what is left to accomplish for LeBron to reach and surpass Jordan.

Keywords: *greatest, athlete, basketball, statistics, successful*

The Greatest Basketball Player of All Time: LeBron vs. Jordan

Ever since LeBron James entered the National Basketball Association (NBA) in the 2003 draft, sports pundits have touted him as the next great talent, and predicted a potential surpassing of Michael Jordan as the greatest to ever play the game. LeBron's career has been incredibly successful, and yet he still has many harsh critics saying that he is overrated, and that nothing he can do will cause him to ever be considered the greatest of all time. However, when applying research related to statistical analysis and other factors, there does appear to be a strong argument that James is well on his way to surpassing Jordan.

Comparing the Statistics

The first and perhaps most important aspect to analyze when discussing the greatest of all time is statistics. If LeBron James is significantly worse statistically than Michael Jordan, then the argument is over and there is no need to continue. He cannot surpass him. This, however, is not the case. In fact, the statistics show that these two are close in most statistical categories. Posnanski (2016) says, "We must acknowledge from the start that there is no easy statistical answer to the question of MJ vs. LeBron" (p. 1). He goes on to say, "the advanced numbers look like so: Win Shares: Jordan: 214 James: 192.5, Value Over Replacement Player: James: 108.6 Jordan: 104.4, Player Efficiency Rating Jordan: 27.9 (first all time) James: 27.7 (second all-time)" (Posnanski, 2016, p. 1). Posnanski ends up concluding that really there is no way to produce a clear answer on which of the two is better statistically because they appear to be in such a dead heat. He says that making an argument for or against LeBron merely based on statistics is, "like

trying to make the statistical argument on why blue is a better color than red” (Posnanski, 2016, p. 1).

Williams and Williams (2016) made the case that the two players are very different and outdo each other in different categories. In this article, charts are used to diagram this. The charts indicate that although Michael Jordan’s average over the first 10 years of his career is slightly higher than LeBron James’, “LJ was more consistent in his first 10 years with respect to points compared with MJ because LJ standard deviation for points is lower than MJ” (Williams, 2016, p. 1). Their tables also show Jordan outperforms James in steals, but that James pulled down significantly more rebounds (Williams and Williams, 2016). The two players outdo each other in different statistics but in the end, it appears hard to determine whether one of them is clearly superior based strictly on these charts.

Bender (2015), of SportingNews.com, really sums up how hard it is to get a good perception of who has a statistical edge. Bender stresses that these players played in different eras, and that this must be considered. He says, “Jordan won all those championships during an era that is perceived as more physical, while James thrives in an era where a NBA record 55,137 3-pointers were jacked up in the 2014-15 season. James could have dominated during Jordan’s time, and Jordan could have dominated the current NBA landscape. It is a wash” (Bender, 2015 p. 1).

So how then can these players be compared since they are so close? Mertz et. al. (2016) produced a statistical model to compare players and develop a ranking system. The algorithm they developed used points per game (PPG), rebounds per game (RPG), assists per game (APG), win shares per 48 minutes (WSPER48), and number of NBA

championships won (CHMPS). Point values were assigned to each of these categories and results were tabulated. When looking at the results, researchers found that PPG, RPG, APG and CHMPS were all good predictors for who would perform better but surprisingly, WSPER48 did not really seem to yield conclusive results. These findings were then used to produce a top 150 list which ended up ranking Jordan ahead of James (Mertz et. al., 2016).

As of the 2017-2018 season, LeBron James is in his 15th season which now equals the total amount of seasons that Michael Jordan played in the NBA throughout his career. This may seem like it makes comparison easier. In a certain sense, it does, but it is also a lot more complicated because of the difference in eras, and Michael Jordan's two retirements, not to mention the fact that Jordan got three years of college to develop while James came into the NBA raw and straight out of high school as a wide-eyed, 18-year-old. Nevertheless, these fifteen seasons of statistics, awards, and accomplishments are worth looking at, and can help us somewhat with comparing these two legends. Land of Basketball's website has a helpful breakdown of the comparison. They have each been to the All-Star Game 14 out of 15 years, Jordan has gone to the playoffs 13 times to LeBron's 12. Jordan has won the Most Valuable Player award 5 times to LeBron's 4, and was all NBA First Team 11 times to LeBron's 10 (Land of Basketball, 2017). All this seems to point to a slight advantage to Jordan, which is true, but when we stop and consider that LeBron has seven more years before being the age Jordan was when he retired for the last time, the outlook changes. Even if James only plays five more years, which surely is on the low end of his potential, he appears likely to be blown by all these numbers.

All of this being considered, if Jordan does have a statistical edge, it is a very

slight one, and LeBron seems to be closing the gap. Statistically, he may not be there yet, but James potentially has close to a decade of playing time left, and if he continues performing anywhere close to his play currently, there is a very good chance he could undisputedly end up surpassing Jordan for the title of greatest of all time.

Political Activism and Race

An important, albeit often overlooked topic is how race and political activism play into perceptions and legacies of these players. The impact that certain athletes have is enormous, and their choices about whether to get involved as an activist in the political and social landscape have widespread affects. Agyemang (2011) discusses how Michael Jordan, as perhaps the most prominent black male athlete of all time, potentially failed to be a social activist. The author breaks down how Jordan's failure to take a stand was a missed opportunity and how, if he had, things might look different in today's current environment for black athletes. Jordan's popularity, during his playing career, very much transcended different races, cultures, and ends of the political spectrum. Because of this, Jordan chose to stay away from addressing many controversial topics. Agyemang (2011) is critical of this however, and goes on to say, "With the influence Black sports heroes have on Black male athletes, has one ever thought about Michael Jordan's possible impact if he chose to speak on social issues?" (p. 1). Despite the opinions of Agyemang, Jordan overall does not receive much criticism for failing to speak up. Whatever potential opportunities he missed, he also avoided the potential backlash and lack of popularity that could have inevitably come from choosing to pick sides or taking a stand, on some of the many controversial issues of his day.

Most critics of Michael Jordan still acknowledge his lack of social commentary or

involvement in politics as a positive. His staying out of civil rights and race debates may have in fact helped the push for equality and not really seeing color. An article from *Sports in Black and White* (2013) says, “White kids wanted to be “like Mike” just as much as everyone else. Suddenly, it did not matter that he was black, just that he was a great basketball player. In a way, Michael Jordan was able to transcend race and make it irrelevant to his public depiction, becoming arguably the first and most prominent African American major athlete ever to do so. Could he even have been one of the final steps toward an equal and colorblind society?” (p. 1). However, there is another side to the coin. Instead of standing up for causes supporting equal rights or endorsing candidates that supporting things he agreed with, he chose to stay out of it all and avoid controversy. Some say that this is an “ignorance of his race and heritage” (*Sports in Black and White*, 2013, p. 1). At the end of the day there is no clear answer. The same article concludes by saying, “Ultimately, Jordan was able to transcend race, to move beyond its duties and labels. Whether this was a move toward equality and a colorblind society or an abandonment of his roots is a question that could be debated continuously. The answer could be both. There might not even be an answer” (*Sports in Black and White*, 2013, p. 1). Regardless of Jordan’s true intentions, the bottom line is that his silence on issues and politics was a safe move that kept him from facing any strong or notable criticism.

LeBron James, on the other hand, has been very outspoken about social issues, most notably racial issues, such as the Trayvon Martin case in Florida. The fact that he, unlike Michael Jordan, has voiced support of certain social causes and has stood up against events and issues that he believes are injustices, could be seen by many as

admirable. However, this has also come with considerable backlash and has caused him to face increased scrutiny and criticism from many groups. Michael Jordan's strategy of playing it safe and just sticking to sports is in strong contrast to LeBron's but may be one reason that he is set on such a high pedestal by many and has less people who think negatively of him.

LeBron does not only get attacked for speaking out about certain issues; however, he also has received criticism for not speaking out about others. When a 12-year-old named Tamir Rice was shot in Arizona, LeBron made no statement or overarching gesture as he had done for Trayvon Martin, a couple years earlier. Many in the media and the African-American community were upset with these perceived inconsistencies. The dead boy's mother even openly criticized him: "After a grand jury decided not to bring charges against the Cleveland police officers who shot and killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice in 2014, activists urged him to take action. James said that he did not want to comment on the issue because he did not feel he was knowledgeable enough" (Sports Illustrated, 2016 p. 1). This is understandable and honestly shows good judgment. Why jump to a conclusion without knowing all the facts? A Huffington Post (2017) author wrote an article defending his decision, saying, "I actually admire James' decision to stay quiet on a situation that he has little knowledge on, rather than giving an uninformed opinion. In my opinion, James demonstrated exactly why we should not expect athletes to be voices when it comes to serious social issues. Like James, many athletes are simply too caught up in their sport to really be on top of social issues. For this reason, it is not uncommon to find examples of athletes taking political positions without really understanding the deeper issues involved" (p. 1).

Because of LeBron's past record on commenting on perceived racial wrongs, including Trayvon Martin or Eric Garner and the famous, "I Can't Breathe Shirt", there was an expectation on him to comment every time there was a similar issue or case anywhere (Huffington Post, 2017 p. 1). The reason for this expectation stemmed from an article he wrote in *Sports Illustrated* in 2014. He discusses his position and his responsibility to lead by example and to use his platform to promote racial equality. He says in that article, "I feel my calling here goes above basketball. I have a responsibility to lead ... I want kids in Northeast Ohio, like the hundreds of Akron third-graders I sponsor through my foundation, to realize that there is no better place to grow up. Maybe some of them will come home after college and start a family or open a business ... Our community, which has struggled so much, needs all the talent it can get" (*Sports Illustrated*, 2014 p. 1). He then went on to back this up by repeatedly speaking out for wronged youths, especially in the African-American community, but as soon as he "missed" one opportunity, everyone turned on him. It appears LeBron James put himself in a lose-lose position by speaking on certain political issues.

Michael Jordan, perhaps recognized this was a probability, and thus stayed away from it altogether. As Jordan once said, "Republicans buy shoes too" (*Sports in Black and White*, 2013 p. 1). That quote really sums up this whole contrast. Michael Jordan stayed out of commenting on any politics at all, even avoiding topics he perhaps should have addressed at his platform and was widely loved and very rarely criticized for it. People on both sides of the political aisle "liked Mike" and bought his shoes. LeBron on the other hand, brought criticism upon himself by taking a firm political stand, and has at different times upset people on both sides of the political aisle. It is perhaps unfortunate,

that someone standing up for things they believe in can negatively affect their public image. It certainly could be viewed as unfair if people use this as a mark against LeBron's greatest of all time candidacy in any way, but it must be considered as a factor.

James' stances could be holding him back from being perceived as the greatest. This seems unfair but could certainly be somewhat of a subconscious factor in the minds of those who evaluate who is the greatest. This stems from the public perception factor which is in large part influenced by our next major topic which involves the media and their coverage of the athletes.

Media Coverage

Another aspect that potentially could be addressed is the media coverage of the two athletes. Michael Jordan certainly played in an era where athletes faced scrutiny, and where the media analyzed them closely, but it was certainly nowhere near the level that it is today. There is a lot of time devoted to LeBron coverage on TV, radio and print media today. Moracki and Billings (2013) talk about how even at a young age, the coverage around LeBron was enormous, starting with his Nike TV ads: "The two primary narratives embedded within Nike's television advertisements feature James as (a) the ideal hegemonic male and (b) a Messianic figure" (Moracki and Billings, 2013, p. 1). They strived to make him into an idealized figure with qualities of a savior, someone who would reinvent what it meant to be the greatest of all time, and all while he was still in high school. This article also deals a lot with race, saying that Nike tried to cast him as "decoupled from his Blackness and recast as White. This decoupling along with the escalation of hypermasculinity and the inflation of Messianic qualities allows James to become both safe and consumable" (Moracki and Billings, 2013, p. 1). In other words, to

avoid certain stereotypes of black athletes, LeBron was shown to be a messianic celebrity with a de-emphasis on his African-American heritage. The beginnings of James' career and his shockingly quick rise to celebrity and stardom can largely be attributed to media coverage. In LeBron's era vs. Jordan's, there is a very different perception of high school phenoms, and a different level of attention and pressure on young athletes.

The media attention could be seen by some as a potential advantage for James, but in some ways, it could be seen as just the opposite. The increased scrutiny of every detail of the man's life by today's media must have an emotionally and mentally draining effect. It reaches a whole new level of insanity, especially, now with social media analyzing everything he does. The criticism that he receives is harsher and more frequent than what Jordan ever received, but not necessarily more deserved. LeBron has been incredibly dominant in his sport, and he led his team to the NBA Finals an incredible seven years in a row and counting, and yet he still has media members bashing him daily. Michael Jordan, carried with him a larger than life, "he can do no wrong", persona during his day. One must wonder if this would have still been the case had he played in today's NBA which is so saturated with social media and analysts who harshly criticize every mistake a high-profile player makes.

There actually have been quite a few studies done on the impact of media on athletic performance. With today's total oversaturation of media content everywhere, it is often hard for athletes to tune everything out, no matter how hard they try to do so. These must have some overall impact on an athlete's performance on the court. The *Sports Journal* produced a very interesting study breaking this all down. The article written on the study starts by saying, "A point of consensus clearly stated in these sources

is that athletic performance efficiency is reduced by distraction. It is believed that distractions interfere with an athlete's ability to focus. Distractions evoke negative mood responses, detrimental arousal and anxiety levels, and stress, thus resulting in the consumption of mental energy" (*Sports Journal*, 2017, p. 1). The article outlines how worrying about potential distractions can drain some of the athlete's mental energy and could result in a decline in performance. The *Sports Journal* (2017) article then lists distractions that fit into this category, starting with things like, "the presence of loved ones you want to impress, family or relationship problems, teammates and other competitors" and finishing, with, "unjust criticism, and the media" (p. 1). With all the pressure factors already present in a professional sport, adding a media presence that seems eager to see you fail, cannot help confidence or overall performance.

There is little disputing the fact that the media has exhibited greater praise and admiration for Jordan than James, and much more overall criticism directed towards James than Jordan. This statement is echoed in a Legends Court article. The article says, "The media is trying to crack the code of LeBron as if he is the Zodiac Killer and intending the public to figure it out when, in reality, most of this is not directed to the media but towards his own teammates and locker room" (Legends Court, 2017 p. 1). It really does seem that way at times. The media is criticizing LeBron for not winning, and then criticizing him again for wanting to put himself in a better position to win, be it by going to Miami, or trying to get management to trade for better talent. This unprecedented relentless criticism was in no way reflected the same way on Michael Jordan. In fact, Michael Jordan is nearly untouchable by the media. His legacy and his persona turned him into a legend, and no one even thought about writing negative Jordan articles like

those written about James. Bleacher Report speaks to this a bit in a 2013 article. The article discusses how much of a cultural hero he was in his time, and how that has still carried out even beyond his playing days: “His style extended beyond the court as he became an international icon. He was so influential that his imprint remained as strong today as it ever did” (Bleacher Report, 2013, p. 1). The positive image that everyone has of Jordan, because of the media’s portrayal, has carried over even today. This may be a reason that a lot of people, many of whom have never actually seen Michael Jordan play, find it sacrilegious to even mention that anyway could be better than Jordan. The legend that he became, and that the media promote is hard to surpass, and LeBron’s negative image in the media will make it even harder.

One final point can be made about LeBron’s treatment in the media and how it holds him back. It is easy to see how someone who thrived in the 1990s before media became as crazy as it is now could have dodged the intense media scrutiny facing LeBron, but it goes beyond that. The media holds LeBron to an insanely different standard than it does even other modern stars. An excellent article from Baltimore Sports Report (2011) addresses this: “In the summer of 2003, Kobe Bryant was charged with sexual assault and his trial dragged through the 2004 season... however, when you look at him now, he is very popular” (p. 1). The media has been quick to forgive and forget with Kobe Bryant but will never let LeBron live down the fact that he “took his talents to south beach” in that now infamous press conference. How is leaving to go play in another city such a heinous thing as to garner so much hate? It’s honestly baffling and continues to impact people’s perceptions of LeBron. Simply put, there are plenty out

there who, no matter what LeBron does in the rest of his career, will never accept him as the greatest. A lot of this is because of the media's treatment of him.

It seems plausible to say that the negative media coverage that LeBron has received, particularly related to his move to Miami and his perceived failure in clutch moments of Finals losses, has hurt his perception in the eyes of many influential people in the basketball world. These negative opinions potentially do end up holding him back from being viewed as greater than Jordan.

Sponsorships and Cultural Iconography

Another piece of the puzzle in determining who is the greatest basketball player of all time, involves looking at their sponsorships, brand and overall cultural icon. There is little doubt that Michael Jordan is perhaps the most iconic and easily recognizable name in the history of sports. People who never liked or cared about sports know who Michael Jordan is and know his brand. The Jordan brand dominated the cultural landscape in the late 1980s, and there really is nothing you can compare it to.

Social identity theory indicates that people are truly motivated to attempt to align themselves with celebrities that will enhance their social status (Carlson & Donovan, 2017). In an effort to emulate these famous people, consumers will often purchase the products and brands that the celebrity endorses or produces. Purchasing these products makes the buyer feel connected to the celebrity and drives up their own self-concept. This idea is truly capitalized upon in the "Be Like Mike" advertising campaign done by the Jordan Brand (Donovan & Carlson, 2017, 177-191).

It is impressive how well this brand has aged, and how well Michael Jordan has been able to stay in the forefront of the news and sports conversations. Every day in

sports talk radio you hear people talking about Michael. You will hear people comparing players (Kobe vs. Jordan, Brady vs. Jordan, Phelps vs. Jordan, LeBron vs. Jordan etc.). He has kept himself at the forefront of the minds of sports commentators and consumers. Certainly, a lot of this popularity is due to Jordan's incredible performance on the court and his six championship rings, but a lot of the credit for his continued relevance and popularity belongs to the strong Jordan brand he built. In the late 80's the Jordan brand originated, and his first shoe was released. Scoop Jackson, Senior Writer at ESPN.com, wrote an excellent article detailing the history and longevity of the legendary Jordan brand. He says, "After he "wear-tested" the Nike Air Ships for the first few months of his NBA career, Jordan -- with the help, ingenuity and foresight of executive Sonny Vaccaro, agent David Falk and designer Peter Moore, among others -- ignited the sneaker game that, three decades later, has become almost as important globally as the game of basketball itself" (ESPN, 2016, p. 1).

Jackson's ESPN article continues by saying, "Because Jordan's name is still attached to his shoes -- and only his name, not necessarily Nike's -- we connect the signature shoe bearing his name directly to his spirit, performance and being. Logically, we know his sneakers are not going to make us "be like Mike," but there is a commercial and universal belief that having his shoes in our lives makes us more connected to him" (ESPN, 2016, p. 1). People still care about "being like Mike", and although Michael Jordan's playing career was elite, and arguably unmatched, his continued relevance is due in large part to an amazing marketing strategy that pushed not only a brand, but this belief in this status symbol and the legend itself. The strategies surrounding the Jordan brand and its rise to relevance and prominence are nothing short of brilliant. The

company has struck the perfect balance between being perceived as a small family business, with one main building on Nike's campus in Oregon, but also having the full support and resources of the massive Nike conglomerate at their disposal (Mullman, 2009). Although, the Jordan brands business is still run with all the care and the values of its "mom and pop" roots, it has become so big that it is bigger than Nike's two biggest rivals, Adidas and Reebok, combined (Mullman, 2009). The brand has continually emphasized keeping Michael Jordan at the forefront of the brand and continues adjusting their marketing to fit his values and lifestyle, so that people can still, to this day, keep "Being like Mike" (Mullman, 2009).

Current players too, recognize the significance and power of the brand and are honored to wear the shoes today. San Antonio Spurs power forward, LaMarcus Aldridge spoke to this in an ESPN article. He said, "Growing up in my neighborhood, [Jordan's] were kind of like the Holy Grail. I couldn't afford them. So just being able to work and save up the money to actually buy them was huge" (ESPN, 2016, p. 1). Little kids who love basketball are still dreaming of owning Jordan's, even now 30 years after their inception. It honestly is amazing the longevity of the product and Jordan's brand in general. As Jackson says in that same article, "It is hard to believe that something -- one thing -- can have a 30-year, ever-changing lifespan in this done-and-die, on-to-the-next-one cultural market we have created" (ESPN, 2016, p. 1). But that is exactly what has happened. Michael Jordan as both an athlete and as a cultural icon is tough to beat.

LeBron James too is a cultural phenomenon, albeit not to the same level as his rival Michael Jordan. LeBron has made a huge amount of money in endorsement deals and has most notably signed on a lifelong deal with Nike. In 2015 Nike made a statement

announcing this lifetime deal. An ESPN article discussed it in detail. The quote from the article read, “‘We can confirm that we have agreed to a lifetime relationship with LeBron that provides significant value to our business, brand and shareholders,’ Nike said in a statement. ‘We have already built a strong LeBron business over the past 12 years, and we see the potential for this to continue to grow throughout his playing career and beyond.’ It is believed to be the first lifetime deal in the shoe and apparel company's 44-year history” (ESPN, 2015, p. 1). Even Michael Jordan, himself, does not have a lifetime deal, although it would be a shock if he ever left the brand. Although Jordan’s shoe is definitely Nike’s most produced shoe, LeBron James is second. His shoe deal with Nike is worth \$90 million, and was the largest athlete deal every made at the time of his signing (ESPN, 2015). While there have been 30 versions of the Air Jordan’s made, LeBron James’ shoes are up and coming, and are already on their 13th version, and have made Nike an estimated \$400 million (ESPN, 2015). This is a staggeringly high number, and although he is still significantly behind Jordan, the fact that he has a lifetime deal promises to make his brand continue well after his playing days are over.

LeBron James, as the best player of the current generation, is undeniably polarizing. While there were plenty of people who “disliked Mike” there was nowhere near the incredible hatred some fans show James. According to The Undefeated.com, “a 2015 Harris Poll listed James as America’s most popular male athlete for the second straight year. A separate Harris poll also asked who the least popular athlete in America was. The athlete, male or female, with the top votes: LeBron James” (Undefeated, 2016, p. 1). But why is he so polarizing? It likely stems from the fact that he was crowned right out of high school, and the expectations were so high. For the most part, he has lived up

to or exceeded most expectations, but people still want to see more, and many even want to see him fail. The Undeated.com article looks at his accomplishments, and they are impressive. As of 2016, “James has been in the Finals so much (six straight seasons and seven in his 13 years in the NBA), they could rename the event *The NBA Finals featuring LeBron James*. He is a two-time NBA Finals MVP, a four-time regular season MVP, and a 12-time All-Star. ESPN ranks him No. 3 player of all time, and his ability to score at will, run an offense, control the boards and truly defend five positions might make him the most versatile player in NBA history” (Undeated, 2016, p. 1). Despite all of this, many look at his now 3-6 record in the Finals as a failure. Even though he has gone to eight consecutive NBA Finals and counting, something Jordan never did, he is still seen as a failure by many. The article sums this up by saying that despite his accomplishments, some will never be satisfied. It says, “But in the eyes of many who salivate at any opportunity to pounce on James, a defeat in the Finals will further damage a legacy that is beyond repair. It is tough being the King” (Undeated, 2016, p. 1). LeBron may never be able to fully satisfy all critics, but he still has a lot of time to at least somewhat silence many of them.

Competition and Supporting Cast

Another hotly debated topic when it comes to the Jordan vs. LeBron debate is the topic of who had it easier. Who had the better supporting cast? Who faced tougher competition? And really, solid arguments could be made either way. However, I believe that Jordan was clearly set up in a better position to succeed than James was at any point in his career, except arguably his four-year stint in Miami but even that is debatable.

Coaching. The first thing that clearly was an advantage for Jordan was coaching.

He was coached by arguably the greatest NBA coach of all time, in Phil Jackson.

Jackson's affinity for calmness under pressure, big game coaching decisions, and a knack for winning championships were unmatched. A Fox Sports article written in 2016 sums up what made him so special as a coach: "Jackson retired with 11 championships, two more than Red Auerbach, but it is not only those rings that separate him from the other 300-plus coaches in NBA history. Sure, he coached enormous talent, but he also managed enormous egos and earned ultimate respect from his players — the toughest part of being a coach in the modern era. His motivational techniques were as effective as they were unorthodox, and his tactical abilities (especially the adjustments he made during playoff series) were far underrated. Combine his Zen Master persona with his unmatched success, and you have a coach who's truly one of a kind" (Fox Sports, 2016, p. 1). An unprecedented 1155-485 record (.704-win percentage) really sets him apart. His ability to calmly and coolly handle the big egos both in Chicago and Los Angeles was very amazing to watch, and Jordan definitely benefitted greatly from his time under him. On the other hand, the list of coaches LeBron James has played for includes; Paul Silas, Brendan Malone, Mike Brown, Erik Spoelstra, David Blatt, and Tyronn Lue (Fansided, 2016). None of these coaches have seen sustained success outside of their time with LeBron. The exception to this would be Mike Brown who took over the warriors for a stretch while Steve Kerr was dealing with an illness, but regardless Brown pales in comparison to the great Phil Jackson.

Teammates. Next, we look at supporting cast. Jordan playing with players like Scottie Pippen, Dennis Rodman, and Horace Grant and had a superior supporting cast to any of James' Cleveland teams, and very comparable with playing with Dwyane Wade

and Chris Bosh in Miami. James went to the Finals all four years in Miami and won two championships with those two. But also won a championship in title starved Cleveland, with a good but not great team around him, outside of Kyrie Irving.

What made especially the 2016 championship even more impressive was the competition. The Warriors were 73-9 in the regular season, which was the greatest record in the history of the NBA beating out Jordan's Bulls' previous record of 72-10. This finals win is by far the most impressive of any of James' or Jordan's and really stands out. One could argue that all in all, James played against tougher competition than Jordan. Although arguably the Eastern Conference was tougher to navigate in Jordan's day, LeBron's Finals opponents were arguably tougher. LeBron played against the Spurs Dynasty led by Tim Duncan and coached by the great Greg Popovich, one of the few coaches who can compete with Phil Jackson for greatest coach of all time, and the amazing Warriors super team, which almost without question is the greatest roster ever assembled, and maybe the greatest team of all time. All of this not to mention beating a young Thunder squad featuring Kevin Durant, Russel Westbrook, and James Harden, who currently are now probably three of the top five players in the NBA. The fact that LeBron found a way to win three titles against that competition is nothing short of impressive.

Super teams. Jordan, on the other hand, while winning six championships, also missed two years in the middle of that run, and never had to face the best Western Conference team of that era, in the Houston Rockets, who won both titles while he was gone. Had he stuck around those two years and added two Finals victories over the Rockets to his already sterling resume, bringing him to eight consecutive championships,

we likely would not even be having this conversation and he would be the unquestioned greatest. But that did not happen, and we will never know what would have happened those two years had he stayed. He did beat the Utah Jazz twice, in 1997 and 1998, however, who featured future Hall of Famers John Stockton and Karl Malone, but his other Finals wins including over the Suns (1993) and Trailblazers (1992) were predictable and not looked at by most as anything too spectacular. Jordan's teams were always the favorites while LeBron has actually been the Finals underdog most of the time.

One last point to be made about competition relates to super teams. In 2017, Kevin Durant leaving the Thunder to join the Warriors was an unprecedented move that will now make it very difficult for LeBron to break through and win another title. If he does end up finishing with only three titles, doubtless many will criticize him for that, and perhaps that will keep LeBron from ever really having a strong argument vs Jordan. However, Michael Jordan never had to face a team like this. Imagine, if after the Jazz lost to the Bulls in the Finals, they had turned around and signed the best Western Conference player not on their roster, which at the time would have been Hakeem Olajuwon of the Rockets. A team of Stockton, Malone, and Olajuwon would have almost without a doubt been extremely difficult for Jordan to beat, and that is basically the equivalent of what LeBron faces going up against Golden State. While it is easy to make the six for six arguments in favor of Jordan, it is important to also look at the incredible teams James has faced, and applaud the accomplishment of winning three titles, and potentially more to come, against them. Despite all of this, he does sit three championships behind Jordan in the title chase. If LeBron really wants to have a

legitimate claim to the greatest of all time title and silence his doubters, he will doubtless have to win more, regardless of competition or supporting cast. He has time left to accomplish these things, but he has more work to do. This leads us into our final topic, which breaks down exactly what LeBron has left to accomplish to stake his claim as being greater than Michael Jordan.

What Still Needs to be Accomplished

LeBron has undoubtedly had an extremely successful and accomplished start to his career. However, from the information analyzed so far, he does appear to be currently slightly behind Jordan when it comes to ranking NBA all-time greats. What then does he need to do to accomplish passing Jordan and becoming the greatest? Gleeson's USA Today article talks about what LeBron James needs to do to surpass Michael Jordan. Gleeson (2015) begins his article by saying, "Trying to suggest LeBron James is the best basketball player of all-time *right now* is undoubtedly premature" (p. 1). He goes on to say, "However, if we're suggesting LeBron can eventually surpass His Airness, as his biased Cleveland Cavaliers teammates did earlier in these NBA playoffs, that's not crazy. In fact, it is actually quite possible" (Gleeson, 2015, p. 1). He then jumps into an analysis of what LeBron needs to do to bring his legacy up to a point where he rivals Michael Jordan. He talks about how LeBron plays in an era of more media scrutiny, and how his failings are analyzed and nitpicked so much more than Jordan's ever were. He also discusses how LeBron, by bringing glory back to Cleveland, brings hope to a championship starved city, something Jordan did not do in championship rich Chicago. Gleeson also makes the point that LeBron has no end to his career in sight, and that him playing another 8-10 years is reasonable which would likely allow him an opportunity to

end up with more titles and MVPs than Jordan and allow him to make an extremely strong case for the greatest of all time.

Lynch (2016) adds to this argument, claiming that LeBron must stay in Cleveland first and foremost, and that any more “team jumping” waters down his legacy and keeps him below Jordan. Lynch also says, “The math is easy. LeBron currently has three rings (in seven tries). Jordan has six. Unless James wins four more and literally surpasses MJ in rings with seven, this entire conversation is a non-starter” (Lynch, 2016, p. 1).

Basically, Lynch believes that if LeBron can continue this run of making championships to 10 finals appearances in a row and win the next four, he will have surpassed Jordan, more than likely. Lynch goes on to break down statistics and reasons for why this is the case and makes some compelling points. Lynch explains that at LeBron’s current rate of play he could not only pass Jordan in points but finish second all-time in that category. Lynch says that moving to second place is probably necessary in order for LeBron to be considered better than Jordan, because, if he finishes any lower, he says that, “Critics will point to Jordan’s time away from basketball as the reason for the disparity” (Lynch, 2016, p. 1). With James’ diverse skill set, Lynch sees the possibility of other amazing feats such as reaching the top 50 in rebounds, the top 10 in assists, or even averaging a triple double in a season, as not outside of the realm of possibility for James by the time all is said and done. Also, with the amount of potential playing time he has left, and the opportunities for records, titles, MVPs, and playoff statistics, there is little doubt that there are plenty of opportunities ahead of LeBron for him to become the best of all time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although at the current moment, LeBron appears to be a step below

Michael Jordan on the all-time great list, everything is in front of him. With LeBron's 2016 come from behind victory over Golden State in the Finals, and him bringing redemption and glory back to Cleveland through a world championship, he is starting to change his perception in the media and appears to have turned a corner, in that regard. The potential years he has left, and his continued upward trajectory, bode very well for his ability to eclipse Michael Jordan, not only before the end of his career, but potentially in the very near future. LeBron's unique blend of skills that make him a complete player, combined with his utterly polarizing on and off the court presence, certainly helps him stake his claim. LeBron James has what it takes to surpass Michael Jordan, and all signs point towards that eventually happening, but only time will tell.

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