



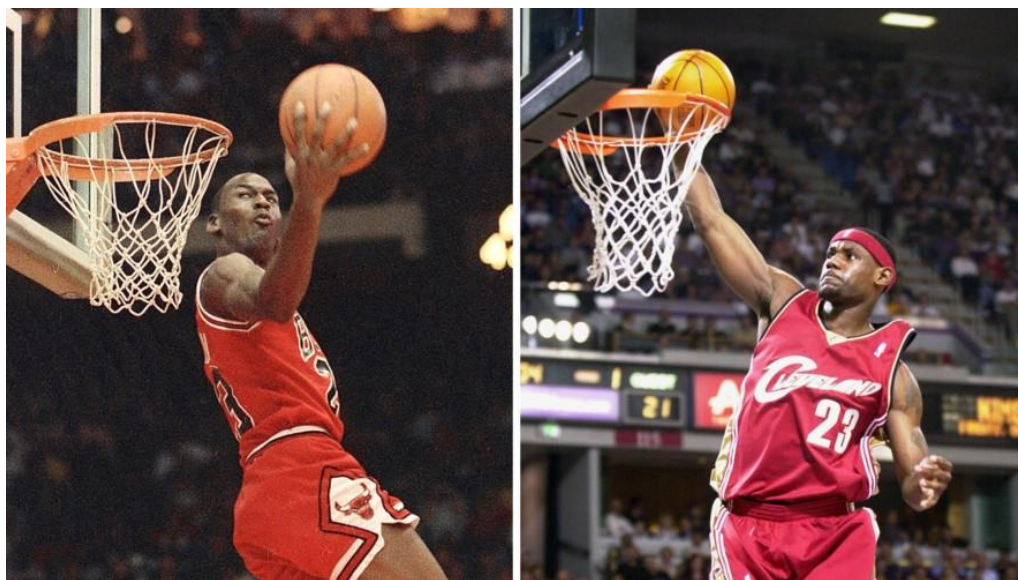
Jordan or James: Who is the best basketball player of all time?

By Fred Bowen, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.22.20

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Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bulls (left) dunks the ball during an NBA All-Star Weekend in February 1988. Cleveland Cavaliers rookie LeBron James (right) goes up for a layup in a game against the Sacramento Kings in October 2003. Photo: John Swart(left)/Rich Pedroncelli (right)/AP Photo



ESPN, the sports television channel, recently released a documentary called "The Last Dance." It is

about Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls' sixth championship season in 1998. It has restarted the debate about who is the greatest basketball player of all time.

Is it Michael Jordan or LeBron James?

Some look to the number of National Basketball Association, also called the NBA, championships each of the players has won. Jordan won six, and James has won three.

This is not the only measure of greatness, though. If the number of championship rings settled the question, the greatest player of all time would be Bill Russell. In his 13 seasons in the NBA, from 1956 to 1968, Russell led the Boston Celtics to an amazing 11 titles.

Russell, however, is not generally considered the greatest player of all time. The 6-foot-10-inch center was a fabulous rebounder and incredible on defense. He was not a great player on offense, though.

Superstars Can Do It All

The greatest-of-all-time debate often settles on Jordan and James because of their all-around talents. The two superstars can do it all on the court.

Take a look at the numbers.

Jordan was a better scorer than James is. Jordan scored 30.1 points per game. James averages 27.1 points per game.

James is a better rebounder and playmaker than Jordan. James has averaged 7.4 rebounds a game and 7.4 assists. Jordan averaged 6.2 rebounds and 5.3 assists.

James is an amazing passer. He has led his team in total assists in every season during his 17 years in the NBA. At 35 years old, James was leading the league with more than 10 assists a game when the coronavirus pandemic closed down the NBA.

Rare Skill

Basketball is a team game. James has the rare skill to make his teammates better. Sometimes fans think Jordan won those six NBA championships by himself. Scottie Pippen, Jordan's teammate for all six titles, helped a lot. For example, Pippen played well during the Bulls' first championship playoff in 1991. Pippen averaged 21.6 points, 8.9 rebounds and 5.8 assists in the playoffs.

Jordan took off the 1993-1994 season to play baseball. The Bulls team was still so good that Chicago won only two fewer games during the regular season.

James, on the other hand, led the Cleveland Cavaliers to the NBA Finals

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in 2007 at the age of 22. His teammates were not as skilled as Scottie Pippen was.

Having to pick between Jordan and James is not easy. It is like trying to choose between chocolate chip cookie dough and mocha chip ice cream. They are both great.

But if I have to choose, I'll pick James. And mocha chip.

Quiz

1 What does the author want the reader to understand about LeBron James?

- (A) He is a more effective teammate than Michael Jordan.
- (B) He is a worse rebounder than Michael Jordan.
- (C) He is a less effective teammate than Michael Jordan.

2 Read the section "Rare Skill."

Which sentence shows the author's point of view about the debate over the best basketball player of all time?

- (A) Sometimes fans think Jordan won those six NBA championships by himself.
- (B) The Bulls team was still so good that Chicago won only two fewer games during the regular season.
- (C) Having to pick between Jordan and James is not easy.

3 Which kind of evidence does the author use to support the idea that LeBron James makes his teammates better?

- (A) average points per game
- (B) number of championships won
- (C) average assists per game

4 Read the following paragraph from the Introduction [paragraphs 1-5].

Russell, however, is not generally considered the greatest player of all time. The 6-foot-10-inch center was a fabulous rebounder and incredible on defense. He was not a great player on offense, though.

How does this support the author's idea that championship wins are not the only measure of a player's greatness?

- (A) It illustrates that Russell did not deserve to win as many championships as he did.
- (B) It illustrates that championship wins do not guarantee one player is significantly better than others.
- (C) It argues that a player's height is the single most important factor in their greatness.