

## Tribes and Goats: The Allure of Professional Basketball

“RIP CITY!!!” Damian Lillard hands over the mic then saunters away, game ball clutched under his right arm, cameramen in pursuit, leaving behind loud cheers and a trail of confetti. The majority of the Moda Center is celebrating, both due to the unfamiliar taste of victory and the sweet taste of revenge—revenge for the playoff defeat five years before, which first introduced me to the world of professional basketball. Just like that night, I am watching from the convenience of my home. But rather than being confused and a little sad, I am jumping out of joy, all because of a single shot by Damian Lillard: a buzzer-beating three-pointer that won the game along with the entire series. Hero and villain, ally and enemy, avenger and assassin—Lillard embodies all of these; how one views him at this moment depends only on which tribe one belongs to. For fans of the Houston Rockets, Lillard is the sole reason for their misery. But for Portland Trail Blazers fans, he is exalted.

One defining trait of professional basketball is an emphasis on the individual despite its being a team sport. Just like how Damian Lillard [single-handedly dictated the outcome of the game on May 2, 2014](#), individual players have the power to influence games by a disproportionate amount. These players tend to be the ones with superior skill and athleticism amongst their peers, and they are recognized by being selected to All-Star games and All-NBA teams. Additionally, every year the Most Valuable Player (MVP) award is presented to a single player. (Although the selection criteria remains somewhat ambiguous.) In addition to the basketball court, these players have significant influence on the overall landscape of the NBA because they can switch teams through trades and free agency, shifting the balance of power among teams and [stirring up fan bases](#) as well. These players naturally garner the most attention

among sports media and are often the topics of discussion among both professional analysts and casual fans.

But with this disparity of recognition comes comparisons by the public as to which players are superior to others—not just in the present, but throughout history. Thus begins the labelling of all-time greats and the arguments about what constitutes greatness at the individual level. A term that has recently been used quite frequently in sports media is ‘GOAT,’ which stands for Greatest of All Time. The meaning is self-explanatory: the GOAT is the greatest basketball player ever. Many contend that Michael Jordan is the GOAT because of his superior offensive and defensive abilities as well as career achievements, which include six NBA Championships, five MVP awards, and fourteen All-Star game selections. However, some believe that others have legitimate cases as to why they ought to be considered the GOAT instead.

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“Bill Russell is the GOAT.”

“Nah-ah.” I turn around to face an old man, stopped in his tracks. He is wearing a snapback with a logo of a red bull’s face stitched onto the front. My friend across the table puts down his slice of pizza, prepared for warfare. What follows is a debate in which he argues why Bill Russell is the greatest basketball player of all time while the man standing outside the entrance of Barbarian Pizza Bar argues why Michael Jordan is the greatest. In the meantime, I’m sitting silently in the middle of the crossfire, enjoying my slice of pizza, while another man watches from the back of the restaurant.

“Who is the GOAT then?”

“Jordan. He was six in o in the Finals!”

“But Bill Russell has eleven rings!”

“Yeah, but there wasn’t the same level of competition.”

They continue to go back and forth, but eventually the Jordan fan is content that he has won the argument. He walks away then stops once again. Turning toward us, he says, “Take this L,” then continues to walk away.

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Basketball tugs at man’s tribalistic tendencies in a way that naturally draws fans to the game, including myself. However, the underlying reason for this tribalism varies among basketball fans. For some, feeling accepted by a community of fans who all support the same team is more than enough. However, for others what really attracts them is the opportunity to “publicly [announce their] associations with successful others” even if they had “done nothing to bring about the other’s success”—a phenomenon psychologist Robert Cialdini calls “basking in reflected glory” in [his study on football fans conducted in 1976](#). Basketball fans in this category want to partake in the greatness they observe in professional basketball, and one way they accomplish this is by affiliating themselves with certain teams. For example, we can observe the countless fans decked out in blue and gold shortly after the Golden State Warriors win yet another championship, displaying their alliance with this dominant team for all to see. (Of course, there are many fans who display their affiliations with teams that are less successful, and they belong to the first group.)

However, they can also latch onto individual players to achieve a similar effect. We need not look any further than the Michael Jordan fan wearing the Chicago Bulls hat who relentlessly

argues why Jordan is the GOAT. He publicly displays his affiliation with the Jordan tribe, both by wearing a Chicago Bulls hat and by readily defending Jordan's supremacy over all other players, and in doing so he partakes in Michael Jordan's greatness. Here we observe the epitome of basking in reflected glory—affiliating oneself with the very best in the history of a single endeavor. He takes delight not only in his own tribe's victory but in the defeat of other tribes—just as I enjoyed both the Blazers' victory and the Rockets' defeat—because his status in the sporting world depends on it: his connection to Jordan is not merely a player-to-fan correspondence but an idol-to-beneficiary dependency. The same can be said of avid fans of a particular team, for whom the loss of another team is their team's gain and, therefore, their own gain.

Modern sports media recognize these tribalistic tendencies among fans. Having been an avid viewer of television programs like *First Take* and *Skip and Shannon: Undisputed*, I can attest to the fact that the topics of GOAT, legacy and the like come up so frequently that it seems like they are all the hosts ever talk about. This is not a coincidence; these shows wish to maximize profits, and they know that by discussing these topics viewers are more likely to stay tuned in. But ultimately this is because fans, at least based on my own experience, tend to be more interested in these topics, for they willingly and frequently discuss them on social media. Regardless of whether or not this is because of the reasons mentioned above, it is definitely enjoyable, and that alone is enough for people to stick around.

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The buzzer sounds and the confetti falls. I'm watching from home as the San Antonio Spurs have just defeated the Blazers in the second round of the Playoffs. The Rockets series is

now just a recent memory, although remains of the joy from a couple of weeks ago linger. Even though that victory may seem meaningless now, it will serve as a childhood memory, a reward for sticking with the Blazers for all these years—both during the good times and the bad ones—and a reminder of why I will continue to support the team. And if the Blazers eventually win a championship before I die, I can point to that moment as evidence for my belonging to the Blazers tribe, not merely as a newcomer but as a lifelong member.

### Works Cited

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