Who is the Most 'Like Mike': A Statistical Breakdown

Photo Via Heat Check on YouTube

Introduction

Basketball is an electrifying sport, with millions of players around the planet constantly honing their skills for the game they love. Throughout the many years of the sport's existence, only a select few have been able to compete among the greatest and rise to basketball stardom. The title of "The Greatest" has been a topic long debated over since the conception of the NBA; however, in any conversation there is one who sticks out above the rest. One man somehow transcends this debate entirely; some call him the GOAT, most call him Michael Jordan.

With the narratives that surround Michael Jordan, many consider him to be a cornerstone for player comparisons, especially when talking about the greatest basketball players of all time. Big future prospects are either 'The Next Michael Jordan' or compared to him in one way or another. This raises the burning question, Who really IS the most similar to Michael Jordan– or which current or former NBA player is the most 'Like Mike?'

Background

Throughout the years, many players have been compared to Michael Jordan in one way or another. The goal of this project is to take 5 players most commonly compared to Michael

Jordan and see which of these players is actually the most similar to Michal Jordan. Though many have been compared to Jordan in their careers, in order to balance length and complexity, we will only be exploring 5. These individuals will be ones who are known to have similarities with Jordan and have spent much of their career being compared to him (Similarities specified below). These players are Dwyane Wade, DeMar DeRozan, Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, and Kawhi Leonard. We aim to compare their basic statistics as well as advanced statistics to Michael Jordan's and assign a 'similarity score' in order to gain some insight as to who is more similar in what fields as well as the overall most similar player.

Methodology

We have selected the following 5 players as those who have often been compared to Michael Jordan throughout their careers in terms of playstyle, accolades, and stats.

Player 1: Dwyane Wade
Similarities: An explosive shooting guard and mid range threat.
Prime years: 2006 - 2007, 2009 - 2011, 2013
- 2005 - 2006 saw his rise as a young star with his first title in 2006 as the main option for the Heat
- 2009 - 2011 saw him enter his peak as he won the scoring title in 2009
- Due to injuries in the 2012 season, his last year for consideration will be 2013 where he won another championship while greatly contributing to his team's success.

Player 2: DeMar DeRozan
Similarities: Highly athletic shooting guard, Jordan-like shot selection, mid range specialist, explosive finishing.
Prime years: 2016 - 2019, 2022 - 2023
- '14 - '17 saw his rise to stardom as a key component to the success of the Raptors
- After having slower seasons with the Spurs, saw new explosive success as the primary threat for the Bulls starting from last season.

Player 3: Kobe Bryant
Similarities: Similar drive to win and be the best, Jordan-like shot selection, threat from anywhere on the court, highly athletic.
Prime years: 2001 - 2001, 2006 - 2010
- Saw his first burst of success in '01 - '02 as a highly explosive scoring machine, won three championships with the Lakers and Shaq
- '06 - '10 we see him really finish his game as the primary threat on the Lakers, established himself as one of the best players of all time

Player 4: LeBron James
Similarities: Considered one of, if not, the biggest threat to being considered the GOAT. Seen as a player of comparable dominance over the league. Mid range specialist and an athletic gift.
Prime years: 2009 - 2014

- often seen as his most dominant hold on the league
- won 4 MVPS, 2 Championships, 2 Finals MVPs
- can argue any 6 year stretch of his career can be his prime years

Player 5: Kawhi Leonard
Similarities: Defensive pressure, mid range specialist, Jordan-like shot selection.
Prime years: 2016 - 2021
- saw his rise to stardom on the spurs
- all of his 5 ASG appearances in this interval
- where he won a ring with Toronto and won the FMVP
- won FMVP with SAS in 2014

With our selected group of players we will subset their statistics for their 'prime' or most productive years. This was determined by a combination of different factors (ie. production, accolades, All-Star selections). In order to standardize this, we will be using the stats for the same number of seasons (6 seasons total) for all of the players including Jordan.
We will compare 3 basic stats:
- PPG: points per game
- SPG: steals per game
- FG%: field goal percent

As well as 4 advanced stats:
- Box +/- : metric that estimates a player's ability to impact the game, based on how they compare to an average players' contribution to points per 100 possessions
- Win Shares: tries to split up credit for the team's successes to individual players
- Shot selection: types of shots taken
- Physical features: Height, weight, wingspan max vertical leap

Each player will be given points for their similarity in these categories. Methodology for determining similarity and score given will vary between each category (see specific analysis for details). In the end each player will be given a score out of 55.

Analysis: Basic Statistics

Points Per Game

The first and most apparent statistic to consider is PPG (points per game). Michael was maybe most famous for how effectively he could put the ball in the basket and is known as a scoring machine. For this category we will observe the PPG of our players of interest and see how they compare to Michael Jordan's.

When looking at this category there are two things of note to consider:
1. The trend of their scoring
2. How this trend averages out

Consider a visualization of our players' PPG throughout their prime years:
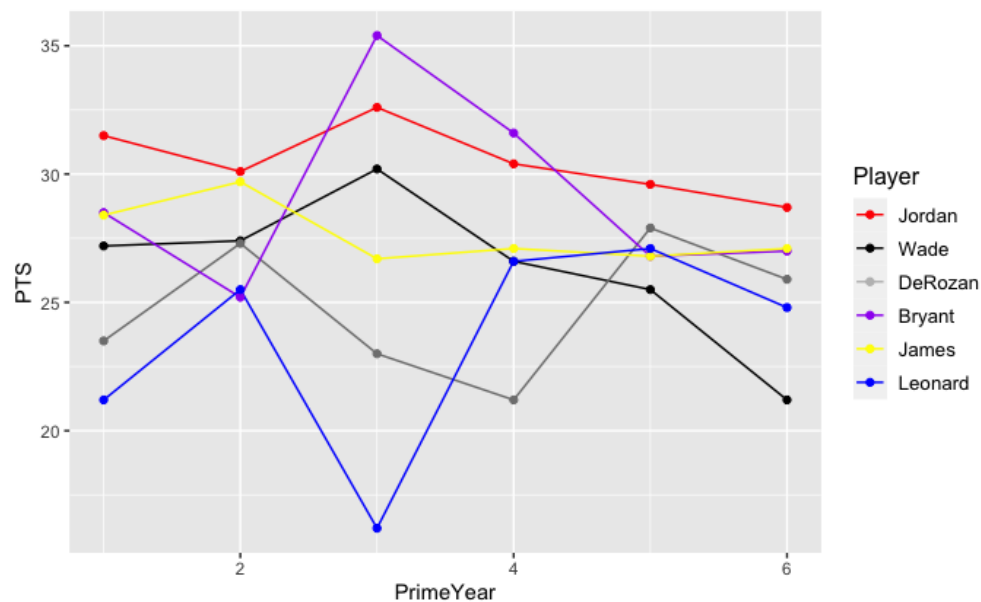
We see that Wade actually has a similarly shaped trend, while Bryant has the highest peaks, and James has the most similar consistency.

Now, looking at how this data averages out, we see that those whose trend stuck out seems to remain somewhat consistent:
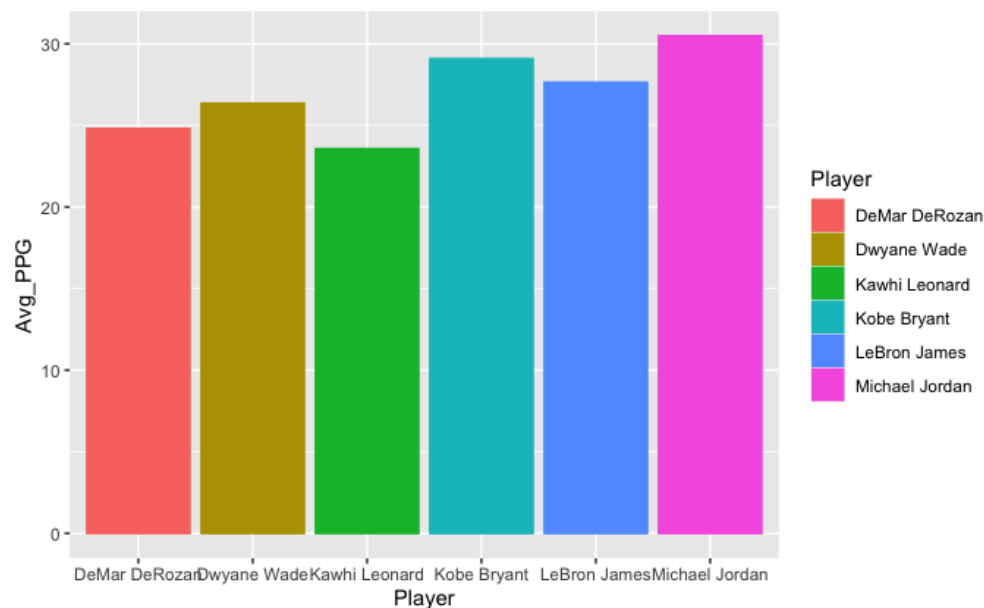
In terms of scoring criteria, we will follow a 10 point scale as scoring is an important category, yet not the most important. Those with an absolute difference of [0 - 1] points will receive a 10,

with a decrease of score by 1 per every single point interval. In general, differentials will follow the following format:

$$Differential = |Avg(Player) - Avg(Michael\,Jordan)|$$

This leaves us with the following scores:

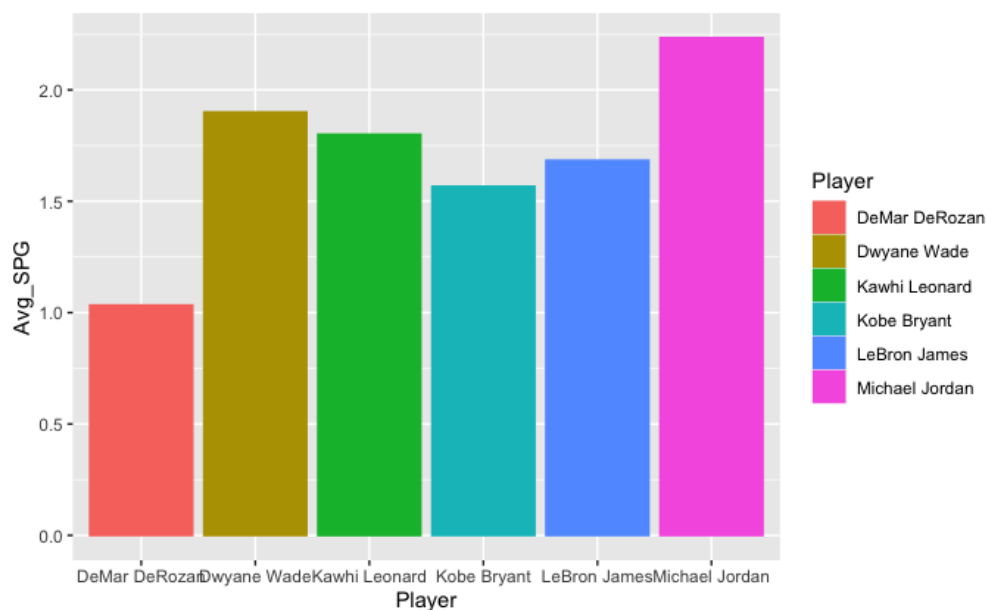| Player	Point Differential	Score
Wade	4.133333	6
DeRozan	5.683333	5
Bryant	1.400000	9
James	2.850000	8
Leonard	6.916667	4

We see Bryant score big this round followed closely by James. This is no surprise considering the scoring machine Bryant has been known to be throughout his career. Leonard scores low, potentially being attributed to the fact that he hasn't been known to be a premier scorer and spent most of his career not being the primary scoring option on his team.

Steals Per Game

Another big component to Jordan's dominance was his ability to be the best player on the court both on offense and defense. In particular, Jordan was a thief on the court, being an expert on steals and defensive pressure. His whopping career average of 2.3 steals a game allowed him to win a Defensive Player of The Year award as well as be named on the All-Defensive First Team on 9 separate occasions. This category will be examined similarly to our PPG where we will analyze their average SPG throughout their prime years and allocate points based on steal differentials.
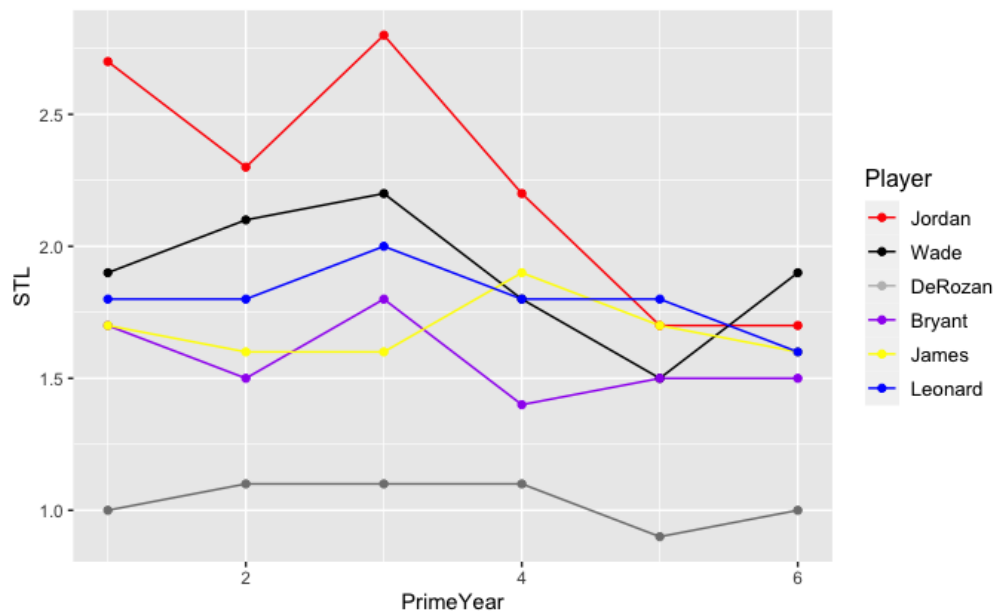
Again, we see Wade with the similar shape of trend, except he also has the highest peaks of any other player on this list. In terms of consistency we see that James remains as a consistently strong contender, but with Leonard actually overall having stronger years.

Looking at our prime averages we see Jordan again topping the list, trailed by Wade, Leonard, then James. In terms of point distribution we will use a differential interval of 0.2 with a scale of 10.

Player	Steal Differential	Score

|		
Wade	`0.3333333`	9
DeRozan	`1.2000000`	4
Bryant	`0.6666667`	7
James	`0.5500000`	8
Leonard	`0.4333333`	8

Nobody quite gets full points this round but we see Wade score the highest followed closely by James and Leonard. All three of these players are known as defensive forces, with each of them being a part of the All-Defensive Team at some point of their career.

Field Goal %

While not an overwhelming highlight of Jordan's greatness, field goal % (FG%) is still an important measurement for comparing players as it gives insight into their scoring efficiency and shooting prowess.
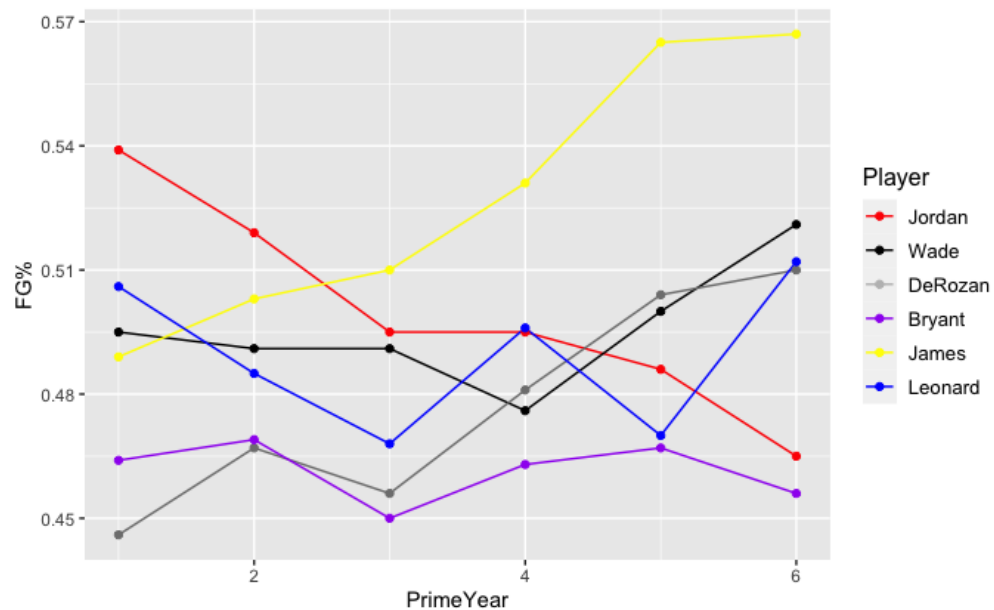
Looking at our prime years we see that Jordan actually had a negative trend in FG% while James had the opposite effect throughout the years.
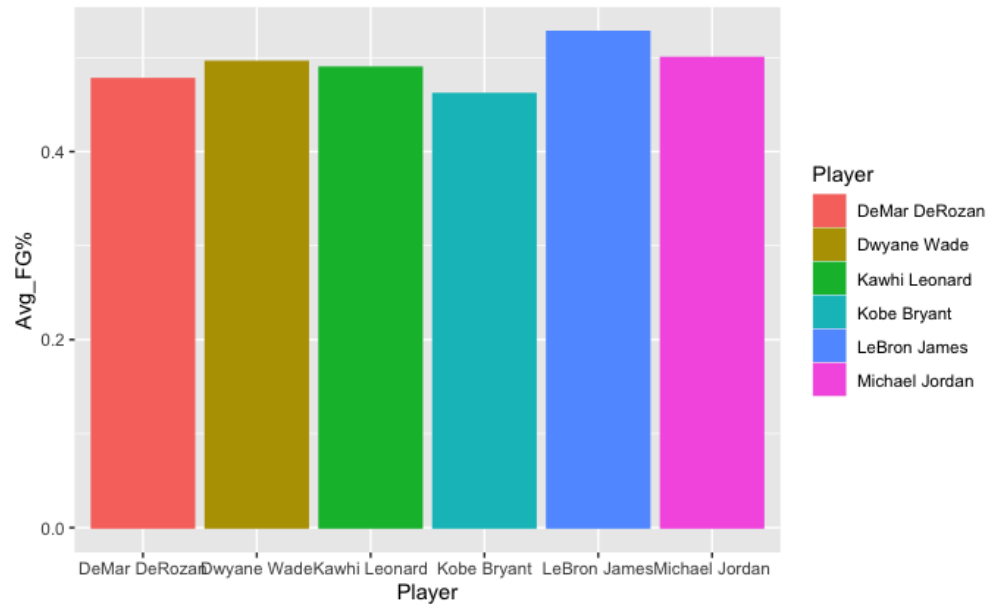
Unsurprisingly, when looking at the averages we see that James comes out on top for this category, followed by Jordan then Wade. Interestingly enough, this is the first category that Jordan does not come out on top of. Point allocation will use a differential interval of 1.5% on a 5 point scale. The score distributions are as follows:

| Player	FG% Differential	Score
Wade	`0.004166667`	5
DeRozan	`0.022500000`	4
Bryant	`0.038333333`	2
James	`0.027666667`	4
Leonard	`0.010333333`	5

Wade and Leonard score big this round each getting the max amount of points. LeBron and DeRozan follow shortly behind. Bryant unfortunately scores low, which may attribute to his extremely high shot volume.

Analysis: Advances Statistics

Box +/-

As we have previously defined, box +/- refers to the estimation of a player's ability to impact the game, based on how they compare to an average players' contribution to points per 100 possessions. More often than not, Michael Jordan was always seen as the best player on the court at any given time, being the single most impactful force on either team. This is evident by his 5 regular season MVPs and 6 Final MVPs. Let's explore how our target players compare to him in this statistic:
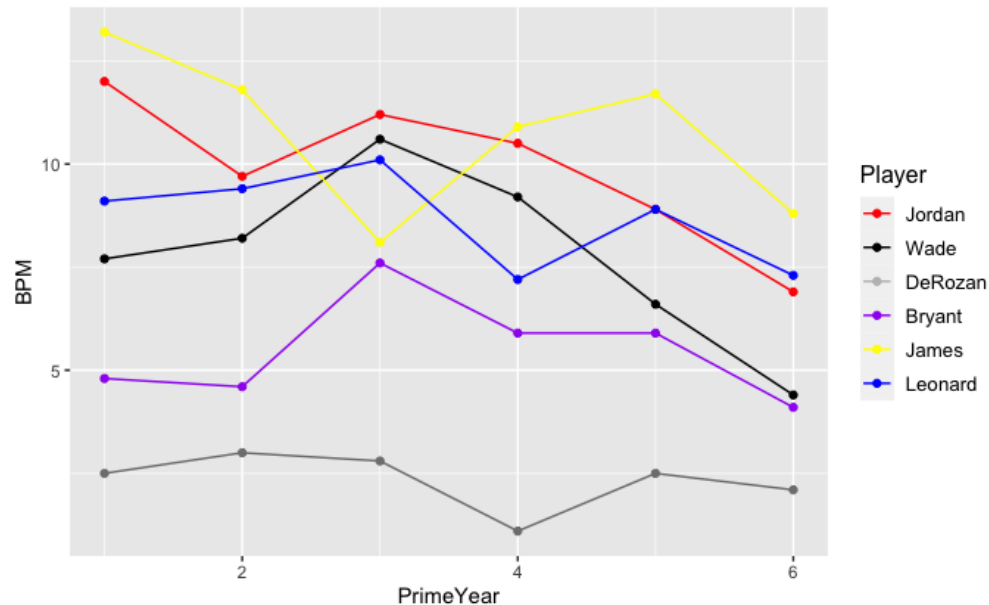
We can see that Jordan has a relatively high and steady trend of BPM across his prime years with LeBron James having consistently the highest (bar his third prime year). We see again that Wade has a similar career trend but with lower overall stats.
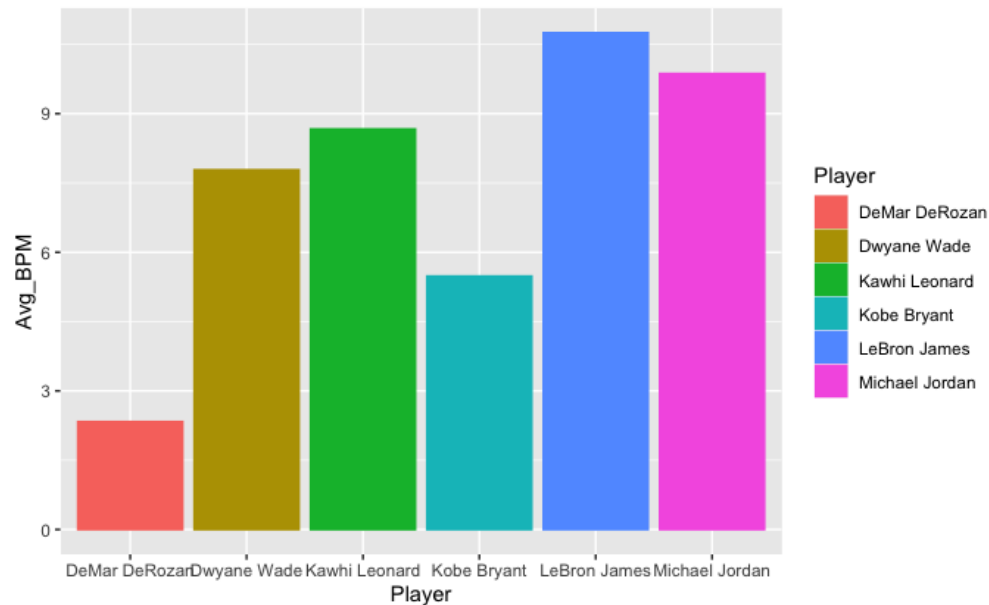
Looking at our averages we see that James has the highest average BPM followed by Jordan then Leonard. In terms of point allocation, our differentiation interval will be 1 with a scale of 10, making our scores as follows:

Player	BPM Differential	Score
Wade	`2.0833333`	8
DeRozan	`7.5333333`	3
Bryant	`4.3833333`	6
James	`0.8833333`	10
Leonard	`1.2000000`	9

Once again, James scores big with Leonard following suit. DeRozan draws the short end of the stick here which makes sense as he wasn't seen as the first option on his team for much of his career.
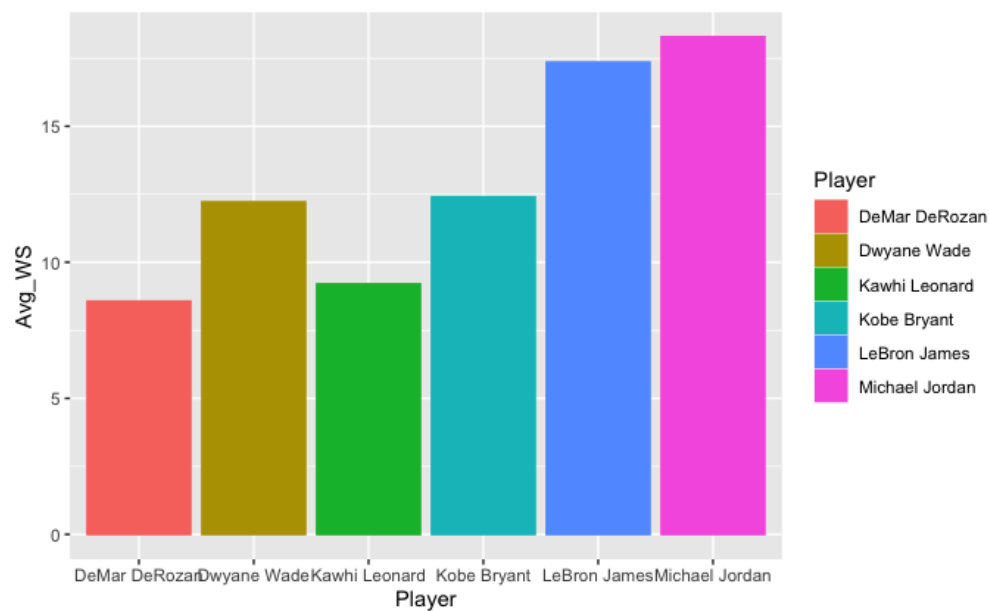
Win Shares

Win shares (WS) are a statistic that, in short, give credit to a player for their contribution to their team's wins. A single win share is equivalent to a third of a team win. Michael Jordan was known as a winner, and known as an individual who could seemingly will his team to victory.

Hence, this statistic is essential in gaining more insight to which player has a similar control of the game.
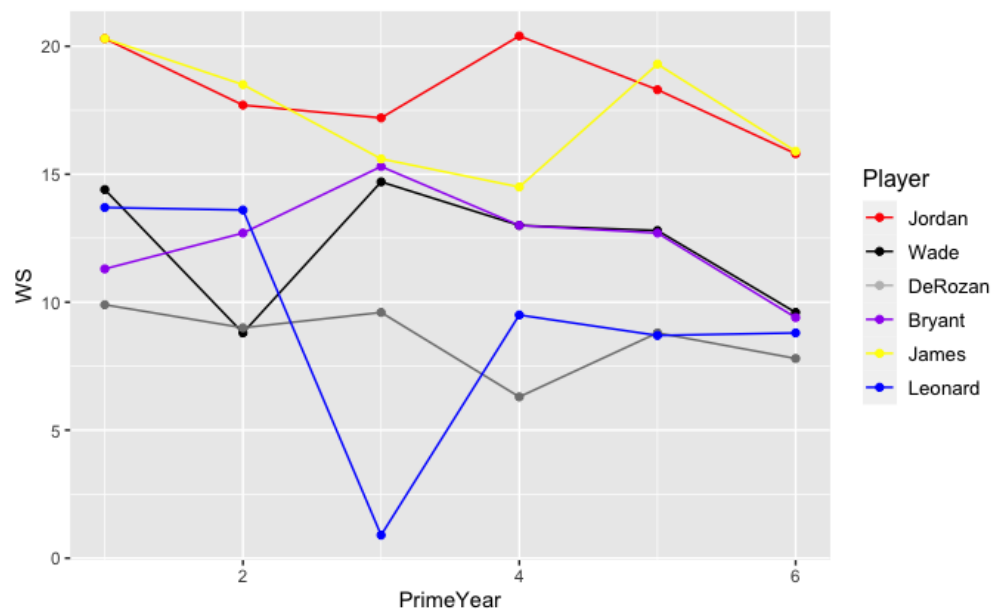
We can see that James and Jordan have really comparable statistics and are consistently higher than any other player we are observing.
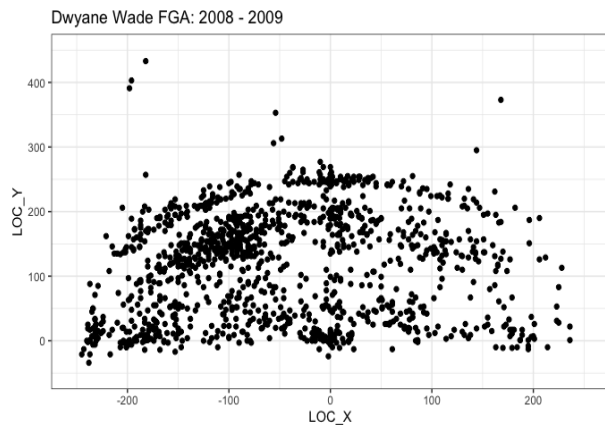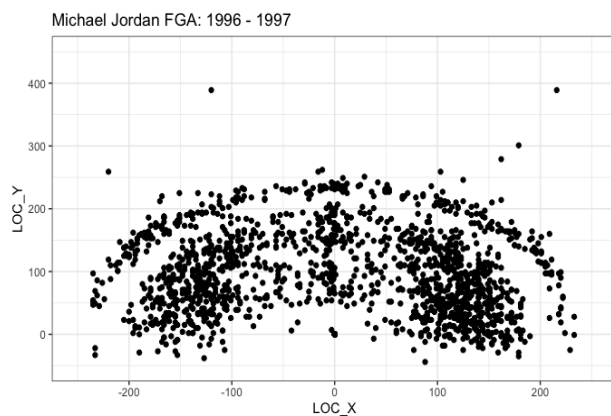

From our averages we can more clearly see the gap between Jordan and James with everybody else. In terms of point allocation we will again use intervals of 2 Win Shares with a scale of 5 total points.
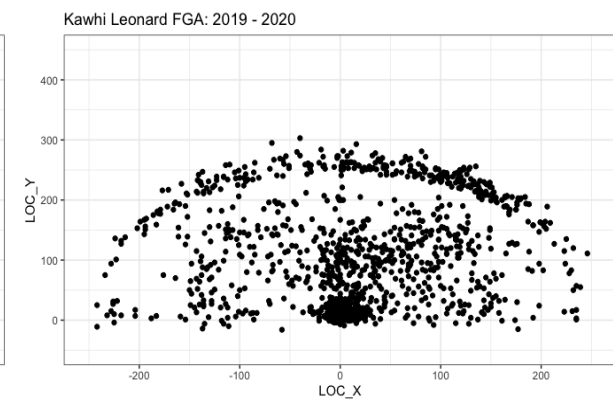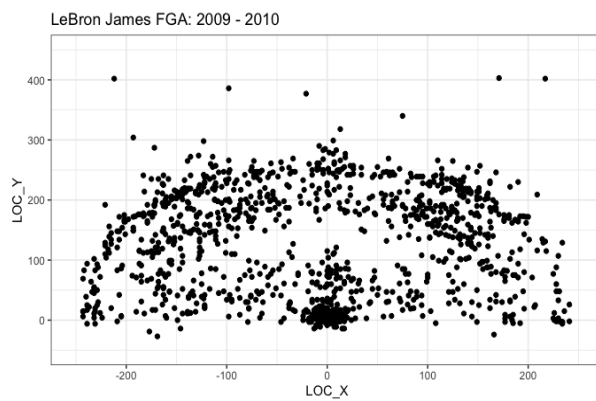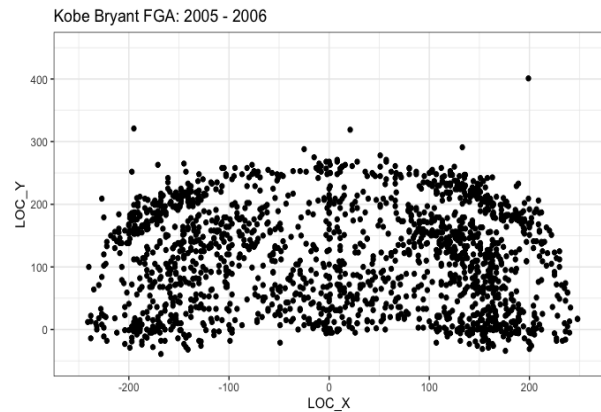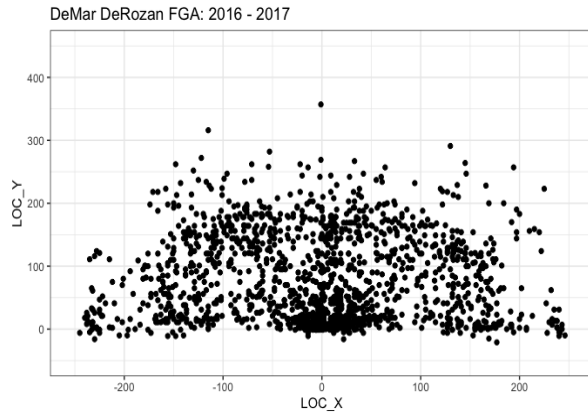
Player	WS Differential	Score
Wade	6.0666667	2
DeRozan	9.7166667	1
Bryant	5.8833333	3
James	0.9333333	5
Leonard	9.0833333	1

We see James score max points here with DeRozan and Leonard lacking a bit. This is unsurprising considering how much of a narrative it is that James is one of the most impactful players of all time.

Shot Selection

While basic and advanced stats can give us a part of the bigger picture that is Michael Jordan's game, things like intensity, footwork, and shot selection are features that can embody the on-court spirit of Michael Jordan, yet are observations that aren't easily recorded or available. However, through the official NBA Stats site, we can adapt players' field goal attempts into a shot chart, which will give us insight into their shot selections. For this segment, data will be taken from their prime season with the most attempted field goals. (For Michael Jordan, we must use his 1996 - 97 data as this is when the NBA started tracking this statistic)

DeMar DeRozan FGA: 2016 - 2017

Kobe Bryant FGA: 2005 - 2006

LeBron James FGA: 2009 - 2010

Kawhi Leonard FGA: 2019 - 2020

There are several ways to interpret the similarities and differences between these shot charts. We could calculate clusters through k-means, find differences in spread and baricenters, or even use another method of distance calculation. However, due to the importance of a shot's distance to the origin, we will compare the average distance between the player's shots and the baskets.

For this category we will take the absolute difference of our players' average shot distance with Jordan's and distribute points using a 10 point scale with differential intervals of 0.2

Player	Average Shot Distance	Differential	Score
Jordan	12.82241	0	NA
Wade	11.99367	0.8287356	6
DeRozan	12.10874	0.7136723	7
Bryant	14.73953	1.91712	1

James	13.01963	0.1972234	10
Leonard	14.04943	1.227016	4

Combine Stats

Our final statistic is one that is commonly overlooked when comparing NBA players: their physical features. Jordan was able to be so dominant due to his talent as well as his physical gifts (ie. wingspan, height, strength, stamina). Since the only official data on players' physical features is from the NBA Draft Combine, we will be comparing the heights, wingspans, and max vertical leaps.

Each stat will have a point scale of 3 with differential intervals of 1, 2, and 4 respectively. Any player that has any stat identical to Jordan will receive an extra point:

Player	Height	Wingspan	Max Vert. Leap	Score
Jordan	6'6"	6'11"	48	NA
Wade	6'4"	6'11"	36	2 + 3 + 1 + 1 = 7
DeRozan	6'6'	6'9"	38.5	3 + 3 + 1 + 1 = 8
Bryant	6'6'	6'11"	38	3 + 3 + 1 + 1 = 8
James	6'9"	7'0"	40	1 + 3 + 2 = 6
Leonard	6'7"	7'3"	32	3 + 2 + 0 = 5

We see that nobody really compares to Jordan in terms of max vertical leap, which is unsurprising given his nickname, "Air Jordan." DeRozan and Bryant were the high scorers of this category due to their similar height and frame and Leonard struggled due to his relatively poor vertical leap.

Conclusion

After tallying all of our scores we get:

Player	Total Score (Out of 55)	Similarity Percentage
Wade	43	78.182
DeRozan	33	60
Bryant	36	65.454
James	46	83.636
Leonard	36	65.454

After our extensive research, we actually find that LeBron James comes out on top with a total score of 46/55, followed closely by Dwyane Wade with 43 then Bryant and Leonard with 36, and finally DeRozan with 33. We know that LeBron out of anybody else has been compared to Jordan the most throughout his career (in both similarities and differences), so it is interesting to see him on top to say the least.

In conclusion, through our processes we have figured out and implemented a simple algorithm to determine a player's similarity to another. Many other players have been compared to Jordan so this same process could definitely be done with others, as well as have other statistics implemented within our comparisons.

But back to the original question: Who really is the most 'Like Mike'? Well, according to our statistics there is enough evidence to declare that LeBron James is the most similar player to Michael Jordan. Maybe the two of them often being considered to be the two greatest players of all time is telling of this!

Sources

https://www.basketball-reference.com/

https://www.nba.com/stats