

# Synthesis

## What It Truly Means to Be the Greatest and Its Implications on the Sport.

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*by Lucas Tembras*

Although both authors make strong cases for who they believe is the greatest of all time, I have come to the conclusion that the “G.O.A.T.” argument is far too convoluted to reach a definite answer. The nature of sports incentivizes comparison, so it is understood why the conversation holds the weight that it does amongst basketball fans; however, I offer readers to consider the variety of factors that are often times ignored when making the case for a certain player as well as the implications the argument holds and its effects on the sport as a whole. For one, we must ask ourselves what it means for a player to be the “greatest.” Ultimately, who we regard as the best is a reflection of what we value in a player. For some, the greatest of all time is Bill Russell which Sapochetti goes as far to acknowledge as “the greatest winner in team sports history.” Consider Wilt Chamberlain for example, who was so dominant for his time that he produced news articles with headlines like [“Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?”](#) Each of the players that have a stake amongst those deemed worthy of the title made unique contributions to the game of basketball and although they may differ slightly in personal accomplishments, they all share a relatively similar degree of success: hence why they are in the conversation in the first place. To try and answer the question as accurately as possible we must delve into the logistics of the question itself. How can we objectively determine who the undisputed greatest of all-time is? Is there a certain metric that we can use to measure a player’s greatness? No, the truth of the matter is that you can’t. The argument itself is based in large part on opinion, therefore, much of the issue comes in large part from a need to justify our own personal thought on the matter. In doing so, we often tend to devalue or ignore the accomplishments of others which has grave effects on our understanding and appreciation of basketball and its lore. Both articles tackle this concept in their own distinct way. In Paine’s article he chooses to omit any of the accolades, anecdotes, or advanced metrics used for Jordan’s case that would have aided other great players’ case for the title (for obvious reasons). What this implies though, is that the introduction of other great players’ career accomplishments dilutes Paine’s argument, which is a logical conclusion to draw. If he were to delve deeper into the statistics of players such as Tim Duncan, Kobe Bryant, Larry Bird, etc. in the manner that he did Jordan then he would be forced to compare why said players statistics and accolades hold more weight when compared to another’s. This very paradox in and of itself ruins the very objectivity that Paine sought to achieve through his analytical oriented approach to the argument. As for Sapochetti, his indifference towards Jordan’s competition and career accomplishments, devalues not only his argument, but his appreciation of the sport as well. When you choose to insist that Jordan played “very good, not great teams,” a topic also briefly addressed by Paine, you fail to acknowledge Jordan’s accomplishments for his era which devalues the experience that comes with learning about the history of basketball. I understand that Sapochetti’s account of Jordan’s competition is a device to push his argument, but then again, that is the very reason that the argument itself is harmful to the sport. While on the topic of competition, we must confront one glaring factor that is often neglected. When we compare players, we often make comparisons amongst players that played across different eras. When we do this, we fail to realize that the game of basketball is continuously evolving. Throughout eras players have had to face far different conditions. For example, up until the fall of 2003, hand-checking or the “illegal contact by a defensive player which impedes the forward and/or lateral movement of the offensive player” as it is formally known, was permitted. Centers were allowed to stay in the paint for extended

periods of time, making it increasingly difficult to score. That was until 2001, when the defensive three second rule was implemented in an effort to combat this. The NBA hadn't even adopted the 3-point line until Magic Johnson and Larry Bird's rookie year in 1979. In addition to this, it took almost 35 for the league to fully embrace the change and begin to truly utilize the three point-line's implementation with the rise of Stephen Curry and the Golden State Warriors. How could we possibly compare players amongst different eras when the set of rules they followed were completely different? For a brief stint, 9 years to be exact, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, known as Lew Alcindor at the time, influenced a rule that banned dunking which led to the unique adoption of his patented move: the skyhook. How would "Air" Jordan ever take flight in such conditions? Growing up, all of these players, as a consequence of the era of basketball in which they were born into, all developed distinct styles unique to their time. This very concept is addressed by Paine when speaking about Jordan's placement on the "usage-vs.-efficiency curve" stating "Jordan's placement is even more impressive when you consider that he didn't make much use of the 3-point shot." He acknowledges that Jordan's prolific scoring occurred in the absence of a dependency on a three-point shot; implying that Jordan could have been even more deadly had he developed this area of his game. With this comes the notion that the argument is not only rooted in opinion but in speculation as well, which makes the argument all the more trivial. Had some of the great players of the past played in today's game would they still be as impactful? We can't be sure. This goes to show the abstraction that accompanies the argument as a whole. Ultimately, the debate itself is too difficult, complex and holds far too many implications to be truthfully and directly answered.