

Simple Math: 6 Comes Before 23



The Beatles are an astounding rock band. More than astounding, they were revolutionary, daring and revelatory. For the record, I think the Beatles are totally gitchy. That being said, the Beatles are overrated.

No band could withstand the amount of hype and praise the Beatles had without being overrated because no matter what the Beatles ever did or continue to do, they will always be just a rock band. They'll never ever be more than that. They were the best at what they were, but what they were was a group of people playing music.

They weren't political leaders, policy-makers or religious figureheads. They've been discussed as if they had ended wars, brought about religious peace and cured the sick. They didn't. They couldn't have. Not by just singing songs. And let us remember, that is what they did.

Michael Jordan? Arguably, the Beatles of the NBA. In the end, he's overrated too.

The man will always be considered one of the world's best and most marketable athletes, and rightly so. But he's still just an athlete, even if he was one that moved tons of product.

I'm well aware that many will misinterpret what I'm saying to mean that I think neither the Beatles nor Michael Jordan are exceptional. By calling both overrated, it sounds as if I would rate them poorly. I don't. I rate them at the top of their classes. But those ratings only go to 10 and they're often listed as 11s, which is impossible ... and unfair ... and a ripoff of "This is Spinal Tap."

Cleveland super-duperstar LeBron James sees it differently. Elevens are everywhere. He made waves Thursday night for announcing that he would stop wearing No. 23 after the end of this season and switch to No. 6. Why? Well, because it's disrespectful (apparently) to wear the number of your favorite player when your favorite player was one of the best of all-time.

So right away, we've learned that we ought to start paying homage only to our favorite role-players.

It's been written that he's switching numbers to pay respect to Jordan. That's not exactly true. According to James, he's not doing this out of respect, he's doing it to stop the *disrespect* he feels he's shown in the last six seasons by daring to wear No. 23 on an NBA court. He's righting a wrong, you see.

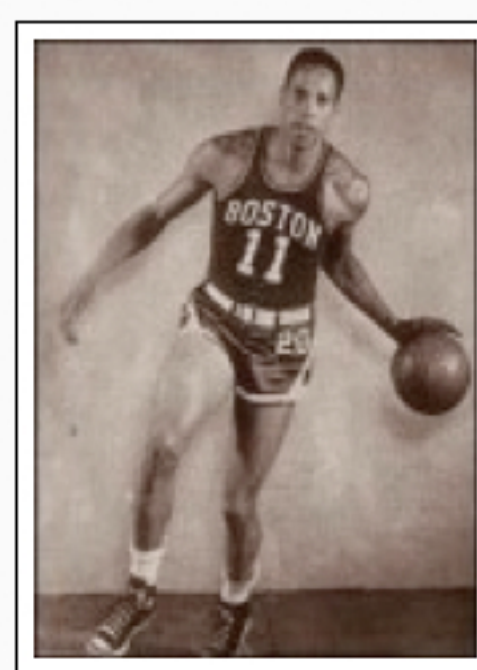
I'm uninterested in the marketing side of this or if Nike has a role. Jerseys will sell. That's what they do. I'm interested in James' thought-process here.

"I just think what Michael Jordan has done for the game has to be recognized some way soon," James said in Thursday's post game press conference.

He said this. Out loud. In front of people. It's about time M.J. had someone out there beating the drum for him to get a little recognition. Mike owes 'Bron a nice fruit basket over the holidays.

"There would be no LeBron James, no Kobe Bryant, no Dwyane Wade if there wasn't Michael Jordan first," James continued.

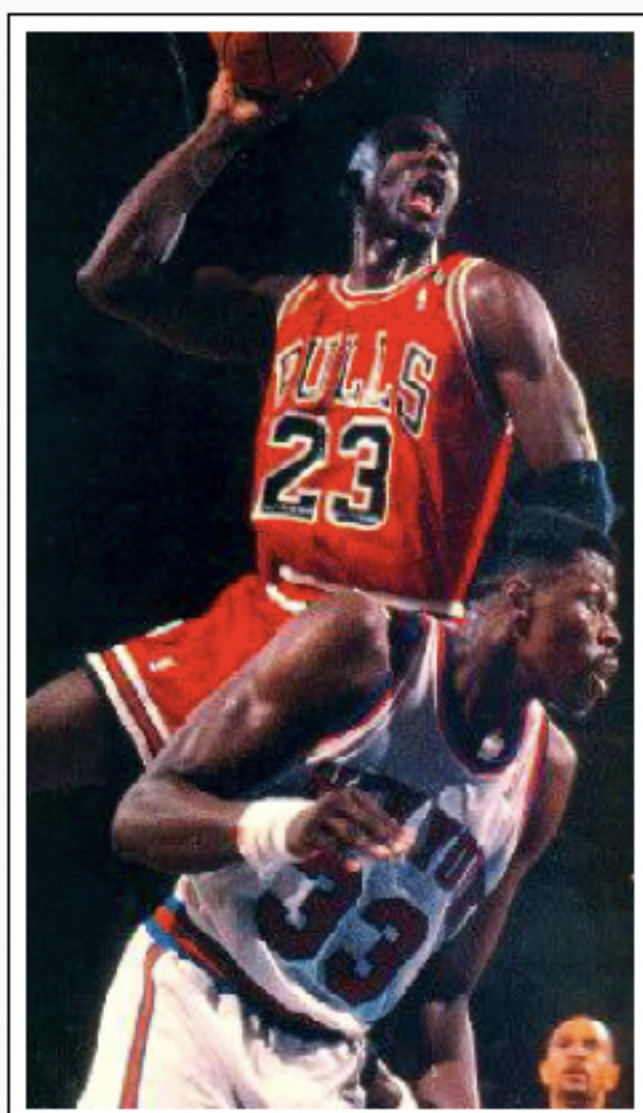
And that's where history ends. Nevermind that Jordan named No. 6 Julius Erving as one of *his* two favorite players (just as James had). Nevermind that Jordan's game mirrored the Doctor's in more than a few ways. Nevermind that there is just as much likelihood of Jordan existing without Erving as James existing without Jordan. History doesn't go that far back. At least not for James.



Chuck Cooper

It certainly doesn't go far back enough to remember that Bill Russell also wore No. 6 and that Bill Russell is one of the few guys that could look Jordan in the eye and claim to be the better player. History doesn't go far back enough to remember Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton's No. 19. Clifton was the first African-American to sign a pro contract. Or Chuck Cooper and Earl Lloyd's No. 11. Cooper was the first African-American to be drafted and Lloyd was the first to actually play.

Nope. History stops at Michael Jordan because that's where LeBron James' memory starts. And that's what this is about: LeBron James and his whims and his ego and what whims his ego can produce. LeBron James has wanted to be like Mike since his first dunk as a 4-month-old (I presume). And because James has loved Jordan that much for that long, it's only right that the rest of us do too.



I'm sure the average Knicks fan just can't WAIT to honor the guy who did this to their team.

Even in Madison Square Garden, where Knicks fans watched Jordan knock out their team in five playoffs between 1989 and 1996. Or in Portland, where Blazers fans watched him throw dagger after dagger into their hearts in the '92 Finals. In Pacer country and Piston country where every game they looked to hurt him, mangle him, slow him down at all costs.

Whatever. Hang his number from the highest rafter because the reigning MVP grew up drinking Gatorade.

A league-wide retirement of the No. 23 won't happen. Not soon, anyway. And I'm glad. Not because I have anything against league-wide retirements or even Michael Jordan (I don't. I grew up with him too.) But I have a problem with James' hubris. Jordan's not Jackie Robinson ... unless you consider being the first athlete to brand himself into being a product salesman the same as being the first athlete to break the color barrier and change the way the world views race. In which case, yeah, I guess Jordan is totally like Jackie Robinson.

They might eventually retire No. 23. James might shame the other 12 No. 23s into switching along with him, but it would be a mistake to do so.

At least wait it out a few years. I'm sure James will forget all about why he switched to No. 6. He's already established that his memory doesn't go back very far.

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