

Michael Jordan has changed the way we judge star NBA players. Jordan introduced a set of characteristics that all dominant players since are supposed to have. And those who don't fit the mold are found to be inadequate on some level. In Erik Cassano's latest piece, he rehashes "The Pass" and makes the argument that the comparisons between Jordan and LeBron are not fair to the Cavs young forward.



Prior to the 1980s, the basketball-watching population at large had a certain mental picture of what a dominant NBA player should look like.

Chances are, he was about seven feet tall with a wingspan that made him look like an albatross with gigantism. He could swat shots and grab rebounds at will, score inside with ease and probably had a pet-move hook shot that was virtually impossible to defend.

He had a name: Kareem. Wilt. Russell. He was the player who separated the boy teams from the man teams, the player whose mere presence automatically vaulted his team to championship-contender status.

Then came the 1984 NBA draft, and the world was turned upside-down.

Larry Bird and Magic Johnson might have introduced the modern idea of the dominant wing/backcourt player, but Michael Jordan became the archetype. Great wing players who arrived on the scene since Jordan have all been measured against him, usually falling short.

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Jordan disciples need to have a competitive fire rivaled in heat only by the radioactive core of a nuclear reactor. They are supposed to be both masters of the fadeaway jumper and high-flying athletes, encompassing both old Jordan and young Jordan simultaneously. They are supposed to treat every possession as if the game hinges on it.

And, above all, they are supposed to take -- and make -- every clutch shot.

So far, only Kobe Bryant has come anywhere close to true Jordan-ness, but ever since the 2004 Finals, Bryant's "killer instinct" has been exposed as a narcissistic love affair with his own greatness. Post-Shaq titles won: Zero.

So the media and fans found a new heir to the Air. As of 2003, the boy wonder who was supposed to follow Jordan from a take-over-the-world standpoint was LeBron James. Growing up, LeBron wanted nothing more than to be the next Jordan. He copied the Jordan moves almost too perfectly, even startling the man himself with his rendition on the occasion the two met.

LeBron wore the number, got the shoe deal, mastered the dunks. He shared DNA with Jordan, it seemed.

But then something happened, something that not even LeBron himself might have expected: Somewhere between being anointed "The Chosen One" as a high school junior and zipping a pass to Donyell Marshall for a would-be game-winning three-pointer on Monday night, LeBron outgrew his teenage idol worship.

Somewhere along the line, LeBron became his own player. And the rest of the world doesn't seem to like it.

In a post-Jordan NBA, a superstar who passes out of a clogged lane to an open teammate with the game on the line is decidedly un-Jordan-like. In a post-Jordan NBA, that player might not even be a superstar at all. He's a blatant coward who is shirking his duty to take the game-winning shot.

And that's the line on LeBron after his fateful Game 1 decision to let Donyell Marshall take the deciding shot.

Coaches across the league would call passing to an open teammate the right call from a basketball standpoint. From a superstar standpoint, it isn't what Mike would have done, which in the eyes of many casual observers, makes it the wrong call, and in turn, makes LeBron measure inadequately on the Jordan Greatness-O-Meter.

LeBron is programmed to be a team player. The media endlessly lauds team players and scolds selfish players who hog the ball. It's why Tim Duncan is held up as an example for all basketball-playing children to follow, while the likes of Stephon Marbury are called team cancers.

But the wholesomeness of team play appears to go out the window when the game is on the line. Then, the fans don't want to see great players who get the other four guys involved. We want to see bloodlusting predators who kick their teammates to the curb and shove the dagger themselves.

Unfortunately, LeBron will always find himself between a rock and a hard place. If he takes the shot and misses, he's a bad shooter. If he takes the shot, draws the foul and bricks his free throws, he can't handle the pressure. If he trusts his teammates and passes the ball -- something fanciers of old-school basketball can't get enough of -- and that teammate misses the shot, he's afraid of taking the last shot.

Any way you slice it, LeBron's basketball IQ, among the highest in the league, certainly among early 20-somethings, will never be totally appreciated because he'll never be totally allowed to stand on the merits of his own talent, win or lose.

LeBron is on his way to becoming a generation-defining player. Unfortunately, that generation happens to be succeeding the Jordan era, and LeBron doesn't

stack up to Jordan.

The real reason is that LeBron isn't the same kind of player. Not even close, save for the thunderous dunks. But that's not good enough for the NBA fans and media who have come to expect buzzer-beaters out of their heroes.

To them, LeBron might never be anything but a bland sequel to the original.