Name: _____ Date: _____

# LeBron James and the Long Game

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1264 words

Who is LeBron James? He is a basketball player from Akron, Ohio. He has played in the NBA since 2003. As of early November 2026, he is 41 years old and in his 24th season, more seasons than any player before him. He was famous across the country at 17, when a national magazine put him on its cover while he was still in high school. This book follows how that happened. It also asks what the sport demands of a body that keeps going this long.

LeBron began playing organized basketball in the fifth grade. At St. Vincent-St. Mary High School in Akron, he was a 6-foot-2 freshman, and his team won the state title for its division. By the summer before his junior year, he had grown to 6 feet 7 inches. A writer for Slam magazine called him possibly the best high school player in America right now. Within months, a national magazine would put him on its cover.

Before the Sports Illustrated issue dated February 18, 2002, went on sale, a 25-year-old photographer came to the school to shoot its cover. He had never shot one before. At 8 a.m., LeBron, a junior, arrived alone: no parents, no coach, no teammates. They started in the locker room. LeBron posed on a desk and in front of a locker, and then they moved to the court. The picture ran on the cover under two words: The Chosen One.

Years later, James said of that cover, "The cover pushed me onto the national stage, whether I was ready for it or not." Reporters crowded into his games. His team lost the state championship game that season. It was the only year he did not win a high school title. In December of his senior year, ESPN2 showed his game against Oak Hill Academy to the whole country. Then came the question every top player faces: what comes after high school?

For LeBron, the answer was the NBA draft. The draft is how new players join the league. Teams take turns choosing, in two rounds. The first picks go to teams by a lottery, a drawing of numbered ping-pong balls. In 2003, Cleveland had less than a one-in-four chance at the first pick, and it won. On June 26, 2003, in New York, the Cavaliers took LeBron first. He was one of a few dozen players picked straight out of high school. Since the 2006 draft, a player must wait a year after his class graduates.

His first NBA game was on October 29, 2003, in Sacramento. He was 18 years old, and he played almost 43 minutes. He scored 25 points, and no player who came straight from high school had ever scored more in a first game. Cleveland lost. By the end of the season, he had averaged 20.9 points a game. The league named him Rookie of the Year, the award for the best first-year player. He was the first Cavalier ever to win it.

The rules explain why the job is so hard. An NBA game is four quarters of 12 minutes. One review of 25 studies looked at games of 40 minutes. It found that players covered 5 to 6

kilometers of court. On average, they worked at an effort above 85 percent of their top heart rate. An NBA game is 48 minutes, so those numbers are only a guide. Still, they show how much the sport asks of a body.

Each of the five players on the court has a position: point guard, shooting guard, small forward, power forward or center. NBA point guards are mostly between 5 feet 10 inches and 6 feet 4 inches tall. LeBron is 6 feet 9 inches tall and weighs about 250 pounds. Basketball-Reference lists him at all five positions. In 2019-20, listed as a point guard, he led the league in assists, at 10.2 a game. In 2021-22, the same site lists him as a center.

The playoffs are made of best-of-seven series, and the first team to win four games moves on. In his first playoff game, in 2006, LeBron had a triple-double, which means double digits in three statistics. A year later, Cleveland met Detroit in a game that went to double overtime. LeBron scored 48 points, including the last 25 for Cleveland, and a layup with about two seconds left won it. Cleveland won the series and reached its first NBA Finals.

In 2010, LeBron left Cleveland for the Miami Heat. Miami won the championship in 2012 and again in 2013, and each year he was named the league's Most Valuable Player and the Finals MVP. In 2013, he missed being the first unanimous MVP by a single vote. In 2014, he returned to Cleveland. Through 2026, he has played in ten NBA Finals, eight of them in a row, and he has won four. That means he has also lost six. To lose in the Finals, a team first has to win its whole side of the league.

The 2016 Finals were against Golden State. Cleveland trailed three games to one, and no team had ever come back from that in the Finals. The Cavaliers won three straight. In Game 7, with the score tied late in the fourth quarter, Andre Iguodala went up for a layup, and LeBron blocked it. The play is known as The Block. Afterward, LeBron said, "I had to go chase it down." Cleveland won the game and the title, the city's first championship in a major sport in 52 years.

In 2018, he signed with the Los Angeles Lakers. In 2020, they won the title, and he became the first player to win Finals MVP with three different teams. On February 7, 2023, he hit a fadeaway jumper late in the third quarter for his 38,388th point. That passed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's record, which had stood since 1984. The game stopped for a ceremony. Abdul-Jabbar held up the ball and handed it to LeBron. In March 2024, LeBron became the first player to reach 40,000.

Through November 2, 2026, Basketball-Reference counts 43,537 regular-season points for LeBron. Only two players have ever passed 38,000: LeBron and Abdul-Jabbar. LeBron also leads all players in playoff points, and Michael Jordan is second. The regular season and the playoffs are counted in separate lists, so a record can belong to one and not the other. At 41, in 2025-26, he still averaged 20.9 points a game. In March 2026, he passed Robert Parish to hold the record for games played.

What keeps a body going this long? Nobody has a full answer. One piece of evidence is a Stanford study of 11 men's varsity basketball players. For five to seven weeks, they aimed for ten hours in bed each night, and they ended up sleeping about 111 minutes more. Their sprint time dropped from 16.2 to 15.5 seconds. Their free throw and three-point shooting each improved by about 9 percent. It was a small study of college players, not NBA veterans, so it shows that sleep may help, not how much.

In 2005-06, LeBron played more than 42 minutes a game. In 2025-26, he played about 33. In July 2026, after eight years with the Lakers, he signed with the Philadelphia 76ers. Add up every regular-season minute he has played, and you get more than 42 days of nonstop basketball. As of early November 2026, he is 41 years old and the oldest active player in the NBA. No one has played this many seasons, so no one can say how many are left.

## Questions

**1. Why did a photographer come to LeBron's school before the February 2002 issue?**

A. To shoot a Sports Illustrated cover
B. To watch a playoff game
C. To give him a trophy

**2. In 2003, how did Cleveland get the first pick?**

A. It had the worst record
B. It won the draft lottery
C. It traded with Miami

**3. Why does the Stanford study show only that sleep may help?**

A. It was small and used college players, not NBA veterans
B. It was written a long time ago
C. The players slept less

**4. In the sentence "Teams take turns choosing," what does choosing mean?**

A. Fighting over
B. Picking
C. Giving back

**5. What did LeBron do in Game 7 of the 2016 Finals, with the score tied late?**

A. LeBron blocked a layup
B. LeBron fouled out
C. The game went to overtime

**6. What did LeBron pass in February 2023?**

A. Michael Jordan's points
B. Robert Parish's games

C. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's scoring record

## Words to know

draft: choosing new players
lottery: chance drawing
playoffs: championship rounds
unanimous: all agreeing
statistics: number records

# Answer key: LeBron James and the Long Game

1. A. To shoot a Sports Illustrated cover
2. B. It won the draft lottery
3. A. It was small and used college players, not NBA veterans
4. B. Picking
5. A. LeBron blocked a layup
6. C. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's scoring record