Name: _____ Date: _____

The Michael Jordan Argument

Reading level 13 · 1641 words

As of November 4, 2026, Basketball-Reference's list of career scoring averages puts Michael Jordan first, at 30.12 points a game. Wilt Chamberlain is second at 30.07, and Luka Doncic, who is still playing, is third at 29.35. The gap at the top is five hundredths of a point per game; by our arithmetic, that is one point every twenty games. The list also has a rule built in, since a player needs 400 games, or 10,000 career points, to appear on it, which keeps players with short careers off the list. Jordan, now 63, played 1,072 regular-season games in 15 seasons, spread across 19 years. Before anyone argues about who was best, the first question is what a count includes.

The awards give a second kind of count. Jordan led the league in scoring ten times, a record, and Chamberlain seven. Jordan won five regular-season Most Valuable Player awards, one fewer than Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and the same number as Bill Russell. He won six Finals MVP awards, and LeBron James is next with four, but that award dates only from 1968-69, near the end of Russell's career, so none of Russell's 11 championships carries one. Chicago won every one of the six Finals Jordan played, 24 games to 11 by our sum of the series scores. Each of these counts something different, whether seasons, votes, series or games, and a ranking can change when the thing counted does.

Totals and rates split him. By career points he is sixth, with 32,292, behind LeBron James's 43,537 and four others, partly because he sat out four full seasons: 1993-94, and 1998-99 through 2000-01. On the rate statistics he rises. Basketball-Reference lists his career Player Efficiency Rating at 27.91, second to Nikola Jokic's 28.80, and his Win Shares per 48 minutes at .2505, second to Jokic's .2637 and a hair ahead of David Robinson's .2502. His career Win Shares, which add up estimated wins, come to 214.02, which is sixth. A total rewards a player for seasons survived. A rate rewards what he does in each minute. These figures are all through November 4, 2026, and the active players on them can still move.

The formulas have limits that their own definitions state. Player Efficiency Rating, developed by the ESPN columnist John Hollinger, "sums up all a player's positive accomplishments, subtracts the negative accomplishments," and returns a per-minute rating. It is scaled so that the league average is 15 in every season, and adjusted for the speed of a team's games. Win Shares is "an estimate of the number of wins contributed by a player." Box Plus/Minus is "a box score estimate of the points per 100 possessions that a player contributed above a league-average player." The phrase box score is the limit. By our reading, a defender who forces a bad shot without a steal or a block leaves no mark in a box score, so a formula built from one sees only the defense that gets counted.

That matters for Jordan, whose defense shows up in awards as well as in steals. In 1987-88 he won both the Most Valuable Player award and the Defensive Player of the Year award, averaging 35.0 points, 3.2 steals and 1.6 blocks. He led the league in steals per game three times and was named to the All-Defensive First Team nine times, with no second-team selections. Counting both teams, Scottie Pippen was chosen ten times and Tim Duncan fifteen. Detroit's coach Chuck Daly, whose team beat Chicago in the playoffs three years in a row, described his plan this way in 2007: "If Michael was at the point, we forced him left and doubled him."

Eras differ in how many possessions a game holds. In 1961-62 Chamberlain averaged 50.4 points in 48.5 minutes a game, in a nine-team league with an estimated pace of 126.2 possessions per 48 minutes and 118.8 points per team, shooting .426. In 1986-87 Jordan averaged 37.1 in a 23-team league with a pace of 100.8, 109.9 points per team and .480 shooting. By our arithmetic, scaling Chamberlain's 50.4 by the ratio of the two paces, 100.8 to 126.2, gives about 40.3, still above 37.1. That is a rough tool, because it assumes that a star uses the same share of his team's possessions in every era, which a box score cannot show. Player Efficiency Rating builds its own pace correction into the formula, as Basketball-Reference's explanation of it shows.

Rules changed what a star could do, and ESPN's account of the league's reforms is blunt about the early 1990s. Rick Carlisle called the game "very physical and bordering on truly ugly at times because of the amount of contact and banging." Jerry Colangelo, who led the committee behind the 2004 changes, said, "Handchecking was a big issue, and there were muggings in the paint." By Basketball-Reference's table, league pace fell from 100.6 possessions per 48 minutes in 1988-89 to 90.1 in 1996-97. Zone defenses stayed illegal until 2001-02, and in 2004-05 the league became "far more hawkish on handchecking." Those facts cut two ways. By these accounts, Jordan met more contact than later stars did, but in his last seasons he also played slower games, with fewer possessions to score in.

Even the shape of the court moved under him. At the start of 1994-95 the league shortened the three-point line from 23 feet 9 inches to a uniform 22 feet, and it went back to the longer line for 1997-98, his last season in Chicago. His three-point record follows the line. He made .427 of his threes on 3.2 tries a game in 1995-96, .374 on 3.6 in 1996-97, and then .238 on 1.5 in 1997-98. Across the league, teams tried 5.0 threes a game in 1987-88, 12.7 in 1997-98 and 37.0 in 2025-26. A scorer who peaked in the late 1980s was working in a game where the three-pointer was a side dish, and any comparison with a later scorer has to say so.

What a star meant was also changing on screens. By 1998 the Finals averaged an 18.7 rating and 29.0 million viewers, and Game 6, on a Sunday night on NBC, drew 35.89 million, which Sports Media Watch's list showed in November 2026 as the most-watched NBA game on record. ESPN says the 1992 Olympic "Dream Team," led by NBA stars including Jordan, "electrified basketball on a global stage," and that the team won its games by an average of

44 points. In 1994 China's CCTV aired a Finals game for the first time. The crowds grew from his first season. Chicago's home attendance rose from 256,430 in 1983-84 to 487,297 in 1984-85, which is 1.9 times as many, by our arithmetic.

A vote shows how the question changes the answer. In December 1999, ESPN's SportsCentury panel of 48 journalists and observers, voting "based on athletic ability alone," ranked Jordan first among North American athletes of the century, ahead of Babe Ruth, Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown and Wayne Gretzky. The Associated Press, which asked a panel of 16 athletes, writers and historians the same year, put Ruth first, with five first-place votes to Jordan's four. Both panels compared players across sports, which removes the questions of pace and rules but raises another, since nobody can say what a basket is worth against a home run. Neither list proves who was better. Each records what a particular group of people decided.

The argument that gets the most attention is about risk in the Finals. Phil Jackson, who coached him, said in a May 2025 video reported by Basketball Network: "Seventh game — how many seventh game in the final series did Michael Jordan go through? It never happened." He is right that all six series ended by Game 6. Jackson also said, "The game has changed, the players have changed, and how the game is being played has also changed." The numbers support each side. Jordan went six for six in the Finals and averaged 33.6 points a game. Basketball-Reference's Finals list (ten-game minimum) ranks that second, behind Rick Barry's 36.3. LeBron James had reached ten Finals and won four. Russell won 11 championships and five MVPs in 13 seasons. A perfect record, many tries and a long run of titles count different things.

Even small parts of the story are argued. In the popular version, Jordan was cut from his high school team. A 1998 Seattle Times account says that he did not make the varsity as a sophomore at Laney High School, a decision that Coach Pop Herring made. Jordan has said it all started "when Coach Herring cut me." Herring's assistant, Ron Coley, said the real question was "what do we do with Leroy Smith?", a taller player, and that "the decision never came down to Jordan or Smith." Sports Illustrated's Thomas Lake wrote in 2012, as ESPN quoted him, that leaving him on junior varsity "was not an oversight." The Seattle Times adds that he scored more than 40 points in a couple of junior varsity games and then played varsity for two seasons. The dispute is over a word, and over intent.

None of this settles who was the best, and the sources here do not try to. What the lists agree on is narrower: ten scoring titles, six Finals won in six tries, a career scoring average that leads by five hundredths of a point, and efficiency numbers that place him second to Nikola Jokic, who is still playing. Every figure here is through November 4, 2026. The three-point line, the hand-check rule and the television audience all moved during his career, and each one changes what the same number meant. Doncic, third at 29.35 and in his ninth season, is the only active player within two points of Jordan's average. Every active player's number on

these lists can still change.

Questions

1. By how much does Jordan lead Chamberlain in career points per game, as of November 4, 2026?

A. 0.05 points
B. 0.5 points
C. 5 points

2. Why does Jordan rank sixth in career points but second in career PER?

A. PER counts only playoff games
B. He played more games than anyone
C. A total rewards seasons played, and a rate rewards output per minute

3. In the sentence "The decision never came down to Jordan or Smith," what does decision refer to?

A. Who would coach the team
B. Which player stayed off the varsity team
C. Which school won the game

4. What happened to the three-point line at the start of the 1994-95 season?

A. It was moved back to 23 feet 9 inches
B. It was removed
C. It was moved to a uniform 22 feet

5. What does the difference between the ESPN panel and the Associated Press panel suggest?

A. The panels used the same voters
B. Rankings depend on who votes and what they are asked
C. Jordan was not on either list

6. Which statistic does the book describe as a box score estimate?

A. Box Plus/Minus
B. Win Shares
C. Scoring titles

Words to know

efficiency: output per effort
pace: game speed
possessions: turns with ball
varsity: top school team
estimate: informed guess

Answer key: The Michael Jordan Argument

1. A. 0.05 points
2. C. A total rewards seasons played, and a rate rewards output per minute
3. B. Which player stayed off the varsity team
4. C. It was moved to a uniform 22 feet
5. B. Rankings depend on who votes and what they are asked
6. A. Box Plus/Minus