

Larry, not LeBron on Mount Rushmore of roundball

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With the girls and boys basketball state tournaments wrapped up, March Madness upon us and Larry Pritchett recently discussing the basketball Mount Rushmore, I thought I would weigh in on the subject.

I have been a Boston Celtics fan since, well, around 1982, give or take a few years. I became a full-fledged hardcore fan during the 1984 season after watching the Boston versus Los Angeles rivalry really reach its peak.

It was about 1980 when I became a Larry Bird fan.

A tall, gangly kid from rural America that loved playing basketball. That was Larry Bird and myself.

Bird came from adversity and a background that should have led him to nowhere, but he persevered and made the most of every opportunity given to him in life.

I admired this attribute as a kid, and still do admire it today in the fact he can take a bad situation and fight until the final buzzer. He's done it in business, he's done it on the court and done it in life.

Bird should be on the Mount Rushmore. In his biography, 'Drive,' Bird notes that while playing softball he injured his finger and it never properly healed. Had it, he may have scored more points and been a better shooter.

I must share one of my favorite Bird trash talking stories. He won the three-point shooting championship during All-Star weekend three times. During his last year in the contest (1986), he went into the locker room and began looking around. Other players asked what he was looking for and he responded, 'Just looking for who is coming in second.'

My favorite non-trash talking story about Bird is when Xavier McDaniel was a rookie. The hot young star played for Seattle (the Supersonics, remember them?) and he had the task of guarding Bird in the Boston Garden.

The Celtics were down by a point with just a few seconds on the clock. Bird walked over to McDaniel and said, "I'm going to get the ball right here, dribble twice, go to that spot over there and shoot over you for the win."

Laughing, McDaniel made a wise-crack to the veteran. The ball was passed in to Bird, who took two dribbles, went to the exact spot he predicted and hit the game winning shot.

He looked back at McDaniel, never uttering a word.

McDaniel would say in interviews after his career was over that after that day he knew he could never guard Bird.

As far as putting Bill Russell on the Mount Rushmore of basketball I must put him on simply

because, as a player, he has won multiple championships on every level: high school, college and professional. He won a gold medal, too, in the 1956 Olympics. He won 11 NBA titles in his career as a player and player/coach. He has more championship rings than fingers and toes.

The NCAA changed rules because of Russell. When no one can stop you and they have to change the rules because of it, you must be a special player. The NBA Finals MVP award is named after Russell.

Russell was a bundle of nerves before each game. He worried so much he would throw up in the bathroom stall before each championship game.

The legendary Celtics coach Red Auerbach, before a game seven against Philadelphia, asked where Russell was before tipoff. He caught up with Russell and asked if he'd gotten sick yet. Russell said no. Angered, Auerbach demanded he go throw up. Russell complied. The team won the game and the series.

I am most impressed with Russell as a man. For all of his accomplishments on the court, he has stood by his word. Despite the people of Boston putting him through the fire for being a black athlete in the 1960s, he has never been petty or vindictive.

If I ever meet the man I would introduce him to my children as someone who worked hard to make sure everyone got along no matter how they looked, was a champion for equal rights and, yes, played basketball.

Michael Jordan needs to be on the list simply because he is, well, Michael Jordan.

I have had discussions with people about LaBron James versus Michael Jordan as far as who is the best NBA player of all time. LaBron may win 30 championships in his career and eclipse Jordan for accolades. However, King James is no Michael Jordan.

I will clarify this, as a Celtics fan, I hate Michael Jordan. As a basketball fan, I have the utmost respect for him as a player. I have to admit it, he is the best ever.

And why? Because he did what needed to be done to win.

Against Dallas in 2011 the Heat came up short in the finals. James did not take the initiative nor did he take the big shots. He seemed, to me, to fade into the background and let his team take command. He scored nine points in the first three games in the fourth quarter of the finals.

If the Bulls needed 20 rebounds to win the game, Jordan went out and pulled down 20 rebounds. If they needed him to score 50 points, he scored 50 points. He made all the other players better by doing what needed to be done to win regardless of his own stats.

LaBron James is a big, strong kid who can score a lot of points. I don't think he makes the team better by his leadership, drive and skills. I think he is the best athlete in the NBA right now but not the best player ever.

Michael Jordan had the intangible of will. He could will a team to victory.

Magic Johnson deserves to be on the Mount Rushmore because he could play any position with excellent results. As big as a forward, played a guard and was even a center on a few occasions. Magic made other players better and could take command of a game, like Jordan.

Again, as a Celtic fan, I hate Magic Johnson. As a basketball fan, you had to respect the man. My fifth player would be John Stockton or Bob Cousy. If you put Stockton or the Cous on any team throughout history, they'd have made that team a contender for a championship.

Stockton had the skills to score, hit the open player and run the court with a vision no other guard has, or ever will have, in my estimation.

Cousy helped invent the fast break, could thread the needle passing and had incredible leadership skills in the lockerroom. He wasn't flashy, just effective.

I know Wilt Chamberlain scored 100 points and had unbelievable stats in his career, but, in my

opinion, he was the LaBron of his time. A big, athletic player who could do a lot physically, but wasn't necessarily a leader with an instinct second to none, like the other players on this list.

I know some NBA rules were changed to stop Wilt's dominance, but for me, personally, I can't put him on Mount Rushmore because of a lack of intangibles.

The only modern players I see with that kind of killer instinct right now are Kobe Bryant and Paul Pierce. Both are at the end of their careers and it is a shame that I just can't foresee that same throwback mentality of 'team first' coming to the NBA any time soon.