

SPORTING LEGENDS: EARVIN 'MAGIC' JOHNSON

SPORT: BASKETBALL

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1979 - 1996

Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Jr. (born August 14, 1959 in Lansing, Michigan) is a 6' 9" (2.06 m) former American professional basketball star who played for the Los Angeles Lakers during the 1980s and early 1990s.



Playing point guard, he led the Lakers to five NBA championships (1980, 1982, 1985, 1987, and 1988), as well as four other NBA Finals appearances. He also led Michigan State University to the NCAA title in 1979 against arch-rival Larry Bird's Indiana State University. Johnson is also the only NBA rookie to win the NBA Finals MVP Award. He is one of only four players to win NCAA and NBA championships in consecutive years.

He was named to the NBA All-Star team 12 times and was named league MVP three times, in 1987, 1989, and 1990. He was named to the NBA's First-Team nine times and the Second Team once. He is widely considered to be the best point guard who ever played the game, although some believe it is John Stockton, mostly because Stockton is 6'1, and point guards tend to be small in height. Johnson is the tallest point guard in NBA history, standing 6'9.

Magic Johnson had a positive impact at every level of competition. He enjoyed championship seasons in high school, college, professional basketball and was a key member of the 1992 gold-medal winning Olympic basketball team (the so-called "Dream Team").

Johnson earned the nickname "Magic" at Everett High School in Lansing from a local sports writer named Fred Stabley Jr., both for his flamboyant passing style and winning ways.

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Magic Johnson was the kind of player who always made things happen on the court.

In different periods of his career, he led the league in assists and steals. He led the Lakers in scoring three times (1987, 1989, and 1990) and in rebounding twice (1982 and 1983). Although he and Bird eventually became the best of friends *off* the court, they revived the heated Lakers-Celtics Rivalry and drew millions of fans to the NBA.

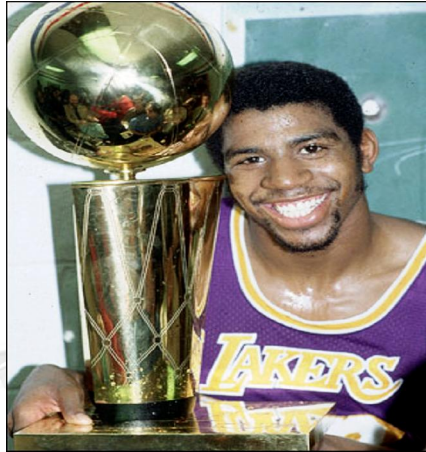
The greatest game of Johnson's career arguably came in his rookie season: May 16, 1980, in Game 6 of the NBA Finals at Philadelphia. Filling in for the injured Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Magic started the game at center and eventually played every position on the floor in a dominating performance.

Scoring a game-high 42 points and grabbing a game-high 15 rebounds, he led the Lakers to the NBA crown, stunning Julius Erving a.k.a. "Dr. J", the Philadelphia 76ers, and a national television audience who came to understand the moniker "Magic".

After choosing to leave school after his sophomore year, Johnson was the first overall pick in the 1979 NBA Draft, chosen by the Los Angeles Lakers. Johnson's impact was immediate. The Lakers were a talented team and featured one of the game's greatest centers in Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, but the end of the 1970s had seen a stagnant team that couldn't quite get to the level of greatness.

Many observers felt that even though Abdul-Jabbar was more valuable, it was Johnson who pushed the Lakers from being a good team to a great one. Featuring a fast-breaking style with often dazzling passes, the Lakers were not only winning games but they won them in exciting fashion, dubbed "Showtime" by fans and media.

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Johnson earned an awesome 5 NBA Championship Rings during his career!

For the better part of a decade, it was common opinion that the college game was more exciting than the pro game. In the 1970s, the NBA was a distant third in popularity among major sports behind the NFL and Major League Baseball. But in the 1980s, NBA basketball was enjoying a resurgence due in no small part to the popularity of Johnson and Bird. The two had brought fun, energy, emotion, and excitement back into the NBA.

With their popularity came more attention to the league and with more attention to the league came more attention to their rivalry. Even though the Lakers and Celtics met only twice during the regular season, each game between the two teams was always nationally televised and the rivalry between Johnson and Bird, and the Lakers and Celtics, intensified. The hard feelings between the two teams were not helped by the fact that in their history the Celtics and Lakers had met six times previously for the NBA title in the 1960's, and all six times the Celtics emerged victorious.

When the two teams met in 1984 for the NBA Championship, many Lakers looked at it as a chance to give the franchise what it never had before; a victory over the Celtics. In one of the more memorable series in NBA history, the Celtics won the championship in seven games. The Lakers were plagued by mistakes at key moments in the series and Johnson made his share of errors. Bird excelled and was named Finals MVP. The Lakers were devastated by the loss, Johnson particularly so.

There was a perception after that series that while Johnson was the flashier player, it was Bird and the Celtics who possessed a work ethic that defeated the more stylistic Lakers. Deeply chastened by the defeat (Celtic forward Kevin McHale had come up with the nickname "Tragic" Johnson to describe Johnson's moodiness in the off-season), the Lakers recommitted themselves and won the 1985 championship against the Celtics. Many of the Lakers said that winning the championship in game six on the Boston Garden floor was the biggest thrill of their careers.

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Magic Johnson was a major factor during the Showtime era of the Lakers.

Statistically, Johnson was probably the greatest offensive producer ever. Assuming every assist creates 2 points, he created 54.85 points per 48 minutes, compared to Michael Jordan's 50.98 or Wilt Chamberlain's 40.82.

Games: 906
PTS: 17,707
PPG: 19.5
APG: 11.2
RPG: 7.2
FG%: .520
FT%: .848

Outside of basketball, Johnson is probably most well known for his announcement on November 7, 1991, that he had HIV and would retire immediately from the game of basketball after twelve years with the Lakers. Johnson's announcement shocked the nation and increased awareness of AIDS.

Johnson produced a book called *What You Can Do to Avoid AIDS*. Money from the book was donated to the Magic Johnson Foundation for the prevention, education, and research to fight AIDS. He finished his career in the Summer of 92, by helping the USA Dream Team capture the Olympic Team Basketball Gold Medal in Barcelona.

But he wasn't through with the NBA. After sitting out 4 1/2 seasons he made a comeback late in the 1995-96 campaign, playing the final 32 games of the regular season for the Lakers.

By then he had bulked up to 255 pounds and did as much of his playing at power forward as he did at guard. After the Lakers were ousted by Houston in the First Round of the 1996 playoffs, Johnson retired once again.

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Scott Burton's Final Thought

Few athletes are truly unique, changing the way their sport their sport is played with their singular skills. Earvin Magic Johnson was one of them.

Just how great a basketball player was Johnson? So great, perhaps, that future generations of hoop fans may wish they had entered the world years earlier - just so they could have seen Magic play in person instead of only on highlight reels.

Still, Earvin Johnson was even more than a revolutionary player, who, at 6-9, was the tallest point guard in league history. His sublime talent elicited wonder and admiration from even the most casual basketball fan.

Whether it was a behind-the-back pass to a streaking James Worthy, a half-court swish at the buzzer or a smile that illuminated an arena, everyone who saw Johnson play took with them an indelible memory of what they had witnessed. From the moment he stepped onto the court, people pondered: How could a man so big do so many things with the ball and with his body? It was Magic.

Johnson accomplished virtually everything a player could dream of during his 13-year NBA career, all of which was spent with the Los Angeles Lakers. He was a member of five championship teams. He won the Most Valuable Player Award and the Finals MVP Award three times each. He was a 12-time All-Star and a nine-time member of the All-NBA First Team. Along with Charles Barkley, he was arguably the most consistent player on the USA Dream Team in 1992.



Although a superb passer, Johnson always knew how to get up there and jam it in!