

SPORTING LEGENDS: LARRY BIRD

SPORT: BASKETBALL

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1979 - 1992

Once every generation or so, a player comes along who can truly be called a superstar. Larry Bird was such a player.

For 13 seasons with the Boston Celtics, from 1979-80 through 1991-92, Bird personified hustle, consistency and excellence in all areas of play - as a scorer, a passer, a rebounder, a defender, a team player, and, perhaps above all, as a clutch performer.



Bird was so self-confident that he was known to waltz up to the opponents' bench before tip-off and predict a 40-point performance for himself. He was such a deadly shooter that he sometimes practiced three-pointers with his eyes closed.

Among Bird's contemporaries, perhaps only, Magic Johnson was considered a better passer, a player who he would inextricably be linked with forever. Few played tougher than Bird, who would leap into crowds and over press tables for loose balls.

Bird was the embodiment of "Celtics Pride." He was a classy, confident, hardworking player who thrived on pressure and inspired teammates to excel. Bird helped rebuild a Celtics franchise that had been suffering from substandard play and poor attendance in the late 1970s.

With Bird as the focal point of a well-rounded squad, the Celtics won three NBA titles and 10 Atlantic Division crowns. In addition to his three championship rings, Bird piled up an awesome collection of personal achievements.

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Larry Bird is arguably the greatest free-throw shooter of all-time.

He became only the third player (and the first non-centre) to win three consecutive NBA Most Valuable Player Awards. He was a 12-time All-Star, a two-time NBA Finals MVP and a nine-time member of the All-NBA First Team. He led the league in free-throw percentage four times.

An obsessive perfectionist, Bird was idolised by Celtic fans and basketball purists of all allegiances. His last-second heroics, ranging from seemingly impossible reverse lay-ups to miraculous 35-foot bombs over multiple defenders, never ceased to amaze those who followed his career.

"Larry Bird has helped define the way a generation of basketball fans has come to view and appreciate the NBA," said Commissioner David J. Stern when Bird retired due to a painful back condition in 1992, after capturing a gold medal with the original Dream Team at the Olympics in Barcelona.

Fans were filling not only Boston Garden, which sold out the final 541 games of Bird's career, but arenas all over the country to witness Bird's exploits. Along with Magic, Bird was revitalizing the NBA, helping the league live up to its new slogan, "NBA Action: It's FAN-tastic."

After only two seasons, fans, coaches and players knew exactly what Bird was all about: big numbers and clutch performances. Bird's concentration and composure were unmatched. He was unflappable and virtually unstoppable.

The hours he had spent working on his shot as a youngster paid big dividends in the NBA. No other player in his era was as good or as consistent a shooter as Bird.

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Winning the Olympic Gold Medal in 1992 with the USA Dream Team was a fitting way to end Larry Bird's illustrious basketball career.

A crafty defensive player, Bird's most famous steal came in Game 5 of the 1987 Eastern Conference Finals against Detroit. With five seconds remaining and the Celtics trailing 107-106, Bird stole an Isiah Thomas inbounds pass and fed Dennis Johnson, whose lay-up gave Boston the win.

The Celtics won the physical, bitter series in seven games and advanced to the NBA Finals for the fourth consecutive year, meeting the Lakers for the third time. But Los Angeles won the series in six games. Bird, now 30 years old and with worsening back condition and foot problems as well, would not win a fourth championship ring.

The end of Bird's career was at hand, but not before one last achievement: a gold medal with the 1992 U.S. Olympic Dream Team, which dominated the competition at Barcelona and won millions of fans for the sport with its brilliance.

As the 1992-93 NBA season approached, Bird decided he could not continue. On Aug. 18, 1992 he announced his retirement as a player.

After 897 games Bird retired with 21,791 points (24.3 ppg), 8,974 rebounds (10.0 rpg) and 5,695 assists (6.3 apg). During his career he shot .496 from the floor and .886 from the free-throw line, ranking fifth all-time in the latter category behind Mark Price, Rick Barry, Calvin Murphy and Scott Skiles.

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Scott Burton's Final Thought

At first blush, Bird didn't look like a future Hall of Famer. His nickname was "The Hick from French Lick," which pretty much said it all.

While other players flew through the air with the greatest of ease, Bird played below the rim. But Bird was 6'9", 220 pounds, and he could run all day.

He was sensational on the vaunted Celtics fastbreak, rumbling down the wing or orchestrating plays from the middle. No other forward in NBA history passed with the flair and effectiveness of Bird.

Bob Cousy, who elevated passing to an art form in the 1950s, said Larry was the greatest passer he ever saw. And Bird was perhaps the most accurate shooter the game has ever seen.

During the 1986-87 season, he became the first player in NBA history to shoot at least 50 percent from the field and 90 percent from the free-throw line in the same season. Bird loved and respected the game. His greatest attribute, though, was his competitiveness. He wanted the ball, even demanded the ball, in pressure situations.

If an opponent made him look bad on a certain play, he would return the deed many times over. He talked trash, badgered officials, infuriated opponents, and made untold 3-point baskets with the shot clock winding down. The Celtics knew that with Bird, they'd usually find a way to win. And on many occasions, they did!



Bird's rivalry with Magic Johnson became the stuff of legend!