

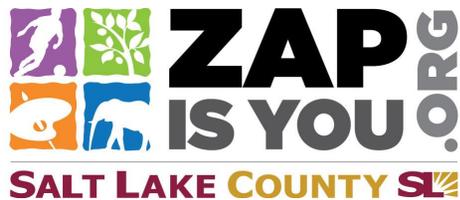
# KING JAMES

by **Rajiv Joseph**

Directed by **Miriam Laube**

March 20 - April 4, 2026

## **SPOTLIGHT STUDY GUIDE** For Teachers and Students



Pioneer Theatre Company's Student Matinee Program is made possible through the support of Salt Lake County's Zoo, Arts, and Parks Program, The Simmons Family Foundation, and The Meldrum Foundation Endowment Fund.



# KING JAMES



**SETTING:** Cleveland Heights, Ohio in 2004, 2010, 2014, & 2016.

**SYNOPSIS:** LeBron James isn't just a basketball superstar—he was Cleveland's hero. As one of the greatest players in NBA history, his impact on the city was undeniable throughout his years on the court there. During LeBron James' rookie season in Cleveland, two young men—one Black, one white—meet and bond over their love for the Cavaliers. Over the next twelve years, their passion for basketball never wavers, even as their lives keep moving in different directions. *King James* is divided into 4 quarters, like a basketball game. Each quarter takes place in a different year, at a different stage of Matt and Shawn's relationship as they explore friendship, loyalty, loss, and the game.

## CHARACTERS



**SHAWN** - Black Male, ages 21, 27, 31, and 33

**MATT** - White Male, ages 21, 27, 31, and 33



# Meet the Playwright, Rajiv Joseph

**Rajiv Joseph** is an American playwright and screenwriter. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, Joseph is a graduate of Cleveland Heights High, received his Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and his MFA from NYU's Tisch School for the Arts. He served for three years in the Peace Corps in Senegal, West Africa.

His first play, *Huck & Holden*, debuted in 2006. The story, about an Indian college student arriving in the United States, is based on his father's experiences as an immigrant. "Being mixed-race has always been a part of my identity," says Joseph. "You are never fully one thing or the other. You always feel a little apart, a little bit of an outsider, even when you are with your own family. That's an interesting perspective for looking at the world." His play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, played on Broadway in 2010 with Robin Williams in the title role. Joseph wrote for two seasons of the Showtime series *Nurse Jackie*, airing in 2011 and 2012.

He is an ensemble member at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, where *King James* premiered in 2022. *King James* was originally drafted as a single scene. It was later turned into a four-"quarter" story — mirroring the four quarters of a basketball game with halftime between the second and third — following basketball great LeBron James' career and two Cavaliers superfans over twelve years.

In a 2024 interview with San Francisco public radio station KQED, James said "I realized I needed to have a play that spanned the length of time, because part of LeBron's appeal and his legacy is his longevity, and part of the story is how the emotions towards him ebbed and flowed over time



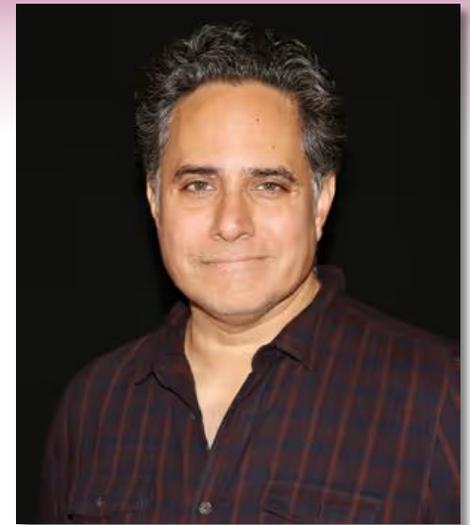
because of different fortunes."

*King James* is inspired, in part, by his own adolescence, growing up in Cleveland Heights. He attended the same high school as the play's character Matt, and spent his youth playing, watching, and arguing about basketball. He says "Team sports, especially of the kind associated with regions and cities, are about a great deal more than simply watching one's favorite athletes in action. There's so much of one's identity, one's upbringing, one's family and friends that's connected to the performance of a team... that sense of it, the sense of belonging somewhere. All those factors are kind of what inspired the play somewhere for me."

Joseph found this sense of belonging as a Cavaliers fan, cheering for LeBron James. As any sports lover knows, passion for a team can lead to intense emotional reactions about games and players. When LeBron James left the Cavaliers to play with the Miami Heat in 2010, Cleveland fans were shocked, betrayed, and didn't hesitate to vocalize their grievances.

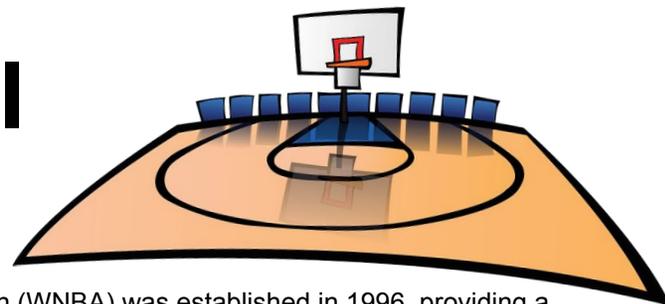
Rajiv Joseph's personal passion for the dramatic relationship between the city of Cleveland and LeBron played a large part in the development of his script. Joseph says about LeBron James' career, "You know, he's from the region, he came here, we loved him, he left Cleveland, we hated him, he came back to Cleveland, we loved him..."

*King James* also reflects current social dynamics in that its protagonists belong to different races and economic backgrounds, but, like so many American men, they use sports as a way to connect and to express otherwise repressed emotions. The play reflects that type of language and coded communication between its characters. "The story of *King James* is an American story, and a Cleveland story, and it deals with the racial dynamics between white and Black people in this country" it's these aspects, Rajiv Joseph says, that make *King James* a "decidedly American play."



# “Nothing But Net”: All About Basketball

Like with many sports, basketball has evolved significantly since it was invented some 130 years ago back in Springfield, Massachusetts. Here are some facts about Basketball you might not know...



## ★ Basketball was Invented by a Phys. Ed. Teacher

In 1891, Dr. James Naismith, a physical education instructor at a YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts, was tasked with creating a new game to keep his students active during the cold winter months. His solution? Basketball- using a soccer ball and two baskets. His primary objective was to create a non-violent game that focused on skill, not brute strength.



## ★ The First Basketball Game Had Only 13 Rules

When Naismith first introduced basketball, he wrote down just 13 simple rules to guide the game. These original rules are still the backbone of modern basketball, although some have evolved. For example, dribbling was not allowed at first, and there was no three-point line. Players could only pass the ball and shoot. Today, dribbling is one of the key skills in basketball.

## ★ The First Basketball Hoops Were Peach Baskets

One of the most iconic and fun facts about basketball is that the very first basketball hoop was a simple peach basket nailed to the gym balcony. Players would shoot the ball into the basket, but there was no hole at the bottom, so someone had to climb up to retrieve the ball each time a point was scored. It wasn't until much later that open-bottom nets became the standard.

## ★ Basketball Was Originally Played With Nine Players Per Team

While modern basketball features teams of five players each, the very first game had nine players on each side. Naismith divided his class of 18 students evenly, with one team trying to score while the other defended. Eventually, the game was refined to the five-on-five format we know today.

## ★ Fouls Were Originally Permitted

For the first 20 years of the game fouls were actually permitted. From 1910 players were then permitted to commit 4 fouls, which was updated again in 1946 to the five fouls as we now know it. In 1989, the NBA updated this to 6 but the International Basketball Federation rules still only allow 5 before the player is sent off.

## ★ Women's Basketball Has Been Played for Over a Century

Just a few months after the invention of basketball, women's basketball was introduced in 1892 by Senda Berenson, a physical education teacher at Smith College. Women's basketball has grown steadily since then, and the Women's National



Basketball Association (WNBA) was established in 1996, providing a professional platform for the world's best female players.

## ★ Make it Orange

Basketball originally started the game using a soccer ball. This progressed to a brown leather ball, but quite often it would be too hard to see blending with the floor or players uniforms, so was eventually dyed to be the orange colour many of us now use.

## ★ An Olympic Sport

The first time basketball was ever played as an Olympic sport was at the Summer Games in Berlin, Germany in 1936. Dr. James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, was honored during the event, and the United States won the first-ever Olympic gold medal in basketball. Since then, basketball has remained a staple of the Summer Games, with the USA continuing to dominate in both men's and women's competitions.

## ★ The First Slam Dunk

There's no denying that dunking is one of the most exciting parts of the game. The first person to dunk was in 1944, a 7ft tall center who played for Oklahoma, who was pinned by defenders under the ring and accidentally stuffed the ball in the basket. Dunking actually ended up becoming banned in the 1960's for about 10 years, mostly because Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was dominating with this move. But this ban didn't last!

## ★ The NBA Was Founded in 1946

The National Basketball Association (NBA), now the world's most prestigious professional basketball league, was founded in New York City in 1946. Initially known as the Basketball Association of America (BAA), it merged with the National Basketball League (NBL) in 1949 to become the NBA. The league started with just 11 teams, and the very first game was played between the New York Knicks and the Toronto Huskies.

## ★ Earl Lloyd Was the First African-American to Play in the NBA

On October 31, 1950, Earl Lloyd broke the color barrier in professional basketball by becoming the first African-American player to play in an NBA game. Lloyd played for the Washington Capitals and paved the way for many future generations of African-American athletes in the sport. His contribution to the game and the progress of diversity in basketball is widely celebrated today.

# CENTER COURT

## HISTORY OF BASKETBALL



**1891**

James Naismith, a Canadian physical education instructor, invents basketball in Springfield, Massachusetts.

### RULES

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**1895**

The first official basketball rules are published.



**1898**

The National Basketball League (NBL) is formed, the first professional basketball league.



**1936**

Basketball becomes an Olympic sport at the Berlin Olympics.



**1946**

The Basketball Association of America (BAA) is founded.



**1949**

The BAA merges with the NBL to form the National Basketball Association (NBA).



**1950s-60s**

Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell dominate the NBA, becoming legendary players.



**1976**

The ABA and the NBA merge, strengthening the league.



**1970s**

The ABA (American Basketball Association) challenges the NBA's dominance.



**1980s**

Magic Johnson and Larry Bird become rivals and elevate the game.



**1990s**

Michael Jordan leads the Chicago Bulls to six NBA championships.



**2000s**

Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal dominate the Los Angeles Lakers.



**2010s**

LeBron James establishes himself as one of the greatest players of all time, winning multiple championships with different teams.

<https://theatreworks.org/2023/09/20/king-james-guide-book/>

**ACTIVITY:** In sports broadcasting, play-by-play announcers describe the action of a basketball game as it is being played, while color commentators add interesting facts and statistics. Find a basketball game on TV, turn the sound off, and with a partner choose one person to be the play-by-play announcer and one to be the color commentator. After a few minutes, switch roles. Which job is harder? Can you keep the dialogue up? Can your audience understand what is going on in the game?

# “Nothing But Net”: All About Basketball (cont.)

## ★ Most Points for a Player in a Game

The most points ever scored in an NBA game was by Wilt Chamberlain who finished one night against the Knicks in March 1962 with 100 points. No player has come close to matching it since.

## ★ Three Pointers

The three-pointer now plays such a huge part of modern-day basketball. But it actually wasn't a thing in the NBA until the 1979-80 season.

## ★ Basketball Sneakers Had To Be Partially White

Basketball sneakers have always been a point of interest for players as well as a part of fashion for many years. League policy mandated that each player “must wear shoes that not only matched their uniforms, but matched the shoes worn by their teammates.” Thanks to Michael Jordan back in 1984, who decided to accept a fine each time he wore his signature Jordans, which were originally black and red. The NBA eventually changed its stance and now any color is acceptable.

## ★ Most Points for a Team in a Game

The most points ever scored in an NBA game by one team is 186. This was by the Detroit Pistons against the Denver Nuggets in December 1983. It was a triple overtime thriller with Denver losing by 2 points. This match also ended up being the most combined points scored by both teams in a game with a total of 300 points.

## ★ Most Points In Total for a Player in the NBA

The title of the most total points in the NBA goes to “The King” LeBron James who currently has 42,000+ total points, and counting! He only recently took this title from Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on the 7th February 2023.



“The King” LeBron James

There are now 2.2 billion players and fans around the world. As participants push the boundaries of the sport, we are sure to see more changes as the story of basketball continues to be written.

## BASKETBALL TERMS used in KING JAMES:

- “**And one**” means that the defending player committed a foul while the basket was being scored, and the shooter has earned a free throw shot, potentially adding one more point.
- The term **bucket** is slang for a successful shot.
- A **crossover** - a way for the ball handler to secretly change the ball's direction while misleading the defender. It involves bringing one knee up towards the chest to increase momentum towards the off-hand side (usually away from the defender), and then passing or dribbling with the other hand.
- **Chalk up** - It is common practice for NBA players to rub chalk or talcum powder on their hands before a game to improve grip.
- **Check** - After a basket, out-of-bounds, violation, or foul, the offense must “check” the ball: pass it to the opposing defender, and then the defender passes it back to start play.
- The **NBA draft** is the process used to assign new players who have recently become eligible to play in the league. Each team takes a turn selecting from eligible players.
- A **free agent** is a player or manager who is not under contract to any specific team and therefore eligible to sign with other teams.
- “**My Board!**” - Board (from the backboard of a basketball hoop) is a phrase for rebound
- The **point guard**, also called the point, is one of the five positions in a regulation basketball game. Point guards are expected to run the team's offense by controlling the ball and making sure that it gets to the right player at the right time.
- To **post up** is to establish a position in the low post, the area near the basket below the foul line, usually in order to take advantage of a smaller defender.
- To **rebound** is to retrieve the ball after a missed shot, usually after it has bounced off the rim or backboard.
- The term **rock** is sometimes used as slang for a basketball.
- The **tip-off** or **jump ball** is how play begins in basketball, similar to a face-off in ice hockey or field lacrosse. A referee tosses the ball into the air between two opposing players who jump as high as they can in an attempt to either grab the ball with both hands or to tip it to a teammate.
- **NBA trades** involve teams exchanging players to improve their rosters or financial flexibility. A number of websites and sports commentators develop trade value rankings to simulate a team's evaluation process, based on talent, statistics, age, current contracts, future prospects, etc.
- **Travel** - It is illegal to carry the ball without dribbling. In high school and college games, a player is allowed only one step. In the NBA, a player is allowed two steps. If a player travels, their team loses possession of the ball.
- In a **jump shot**, a player leaps up into the air, ball in hand above the head, and launches the ball in a high arc towards the basket.
- **Turnaround** - When a player with the ball establishes a position in the area near the basket below the foul line, (see post up) they usually face away from the basket to protect the ball from being stolen by the defender. In order to shoot, they have to turn around to face the basket. In a **turnaround jump shot**, the player jumps, spins around in mid-air 180 degrees, and shoots the ball.
- A **fadeaway shot** is a jump shot in which the shooter attempts their shot leaning backward, creating the effect of “fading away” from their defender. While this move makes it more difficult for the defender to block the shot, it is also one of the most difficult shots with which to hit the basket.
- In a **turnaround fadeaway jump shot**, the player jumps, spins around in mid-air, leans back, and then shoots the ball.

# Welcome to Cleveland Heights

*King James* includes a number of references to locations and institutions in the Cleveland area:

**Cleveland Heights High School** is a coed public high school. The student body is largely Black (75%), with 15% White, 6% mixed, 3% Latinx, and 2% Asian.

**La Cave du Vin** (French: The Cave of Wine, i.e. The Wine Cellar). La Cave, as it is often called, opened in Cleveland Heights in 1997. In 2023 it moved to Tremont.

## “Fifty years Cleveland hasn’t had a championship”

In 2014, many believed that Cleveland had a sports curse. The Cleveland Browns football team have not won an NFL championship since 1964. The Cleveland Indians baseball team have not won a world series since 1948. And the Cavaliers had never won an NBA championship. They would win in 2016, breaking the city’s 52-year streak.

**Majic 105.7** first aired in 1948, and after several intermittent call signs became WMJI in 1981. In 1990 the station adapted a rock oldies format.

**Nighttown** a premiere jazz destination that opened in 1965, booked top acts and hosted impromptu performances by such stars as Wynton Marsalis and Stevie Wonder.

**The Rapid | RTA Rapid Transit** is a rapid transit rail system owned and operated by the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority.

**Saint Ignatius High School** is a private Jesuit boys’ high school located in the Ohio City neighborhood, about ten miles west of Cleveland Heights. The school’s minority student enrollment is 22% and the student-teacher ratio is 12:1.

**TavCo** - There has been a tavern at 2299 Lee Road in Cleveland Heights since 1991, but it wasn’t called the Tavern Company (TavCo) until 2014.

**The Tribe** was a nickname for the Cleveland Indians, a Major League Baseball team founded in 1894 that played under several names before settling on the Indians in 1915. (In response to the Native American mascot controversy, the team adopted the name the Guardians following the 2021 season.)

**Akron, Ohio**, is located about 40 miles south of Cleveland. Founded in 1825, Akron was the fastest-growing city in the nation in the 1910s, thanks in large part to the Goodyear, Firestone, Goodrich, and General tire companies working with the growing auto industry that surged in the 1950s. But like many other industries of the Rust Belt, both the tire and rubber industries experienced major decline. By the early 1990s, when LeBron James was growing up there, Goodyear was the last major tire manufacturer based in Akron.



**King James** is set in **Cleveland Heights, Ohio**- a suburb located eight miles east of downtown Cleveland.

Founded in 1796, Cleveland Heights was built by settlers in log cabins around a quarry. With the

development of the streetcar in the 1890s, residential development and the suburbs became more practical all designed with tree-lined streets, beautiful neighborhood parks, and homes and businesses with well crafted architecture. The population grew so quickly that it earned the status of a city on August 9, 1921.

Cleveland was among the top 10 largest U.S. cities by population for much of the 20th century. But by the 1960s, however, the national decline of the steel and auto industries began to hurt the region’s economy. From 1950 to 2000 the city’s population sunk by almost half of its citizens.

At the same time, Black population in Cleveland Heights was less than 1% in 1960, mostly due to restrictive covenants (contracts limiting what could be done with property). Black Clevelanders moving into the area in the 1960s led to violence and pushback from some white citizens. In later decades, the population grew more diverse. Led by members of St. Ann Church, residents formed the Heights Community Congress to achieve a racially integrated community. Heights Citizens for Human Rights also formed to protest violence against Black citizens. Cleveland Heights City Council passed fair housing legislation and established a city housing service in 1976.

Cleveland Heights was considered to be Ohio’s middle class. In 2010, during the setting of *King James*, the population was 50% White, 42% Black, 4% Asian, 2% Latinx, and 2% mixed/other.

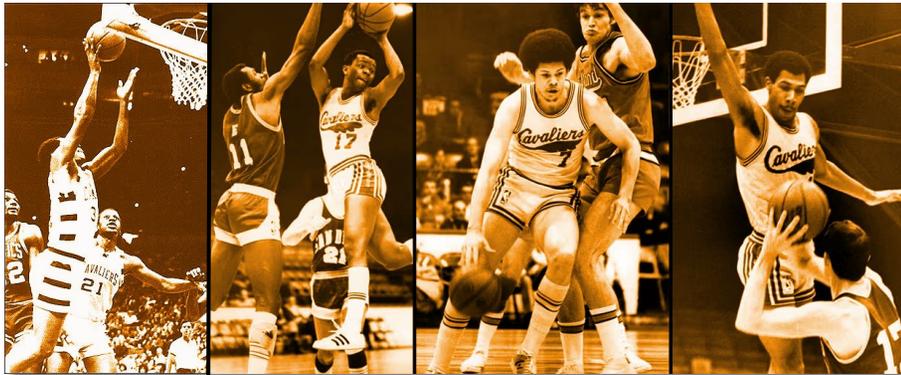


# The Cleveland Cavaliers

The Cleveland Cavaliers history have been a staple of the NBA since their start in 1970, but few people know its origins.

The team began play as an expansion team in 1970, along with the Portland Trail Blazers and Buffalo Braves.

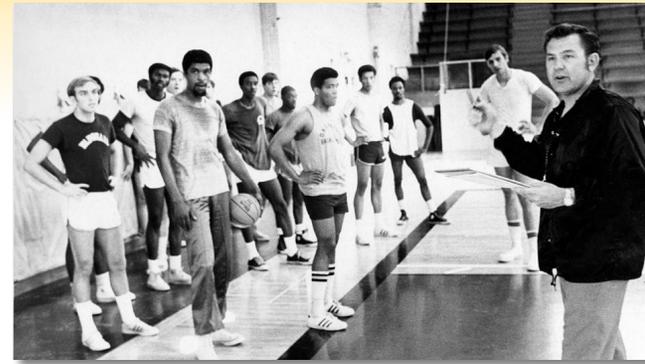
The name “Cavaliers” was chosen by owner Nick Mileti who noticed that many teams had nicknames that came from military terms. So he decided to do something similar for his new basketball franchise. After some research, Mileti settled on “Cavaliers” as they represented nobility and courage. The name also pays homage to Cleveland’s history of cavalier culture during colonial times when French settlers first arrived in Northeast Ohio centuries ago.



**1970-1980: The Slow Start-** In the beginning the Cavaliers struggled to find their footing. Their inaugural season (1970-71) ended with only 15 wins but 67 losses. Yet hope was on the horizon as they drafted promising talents like Austin Carr. By 1975, they made it to the playoffs for the first time, though they were quickly eliminated.

**1981-1993: Building Momentum-** The '80s brought gradual improvement. Under coach Lenny Wilkens and players such as Mark Price and Brad Daugherty, they began making playoff appearances more regularly—reaching the playoffs six times during this period.

**1994-2003: A Decade of Struggles-** After that peak, however, things took a downturn; several seasons saw them at or near the bottom of standings due to poor management decisions and player turnover. It wasn't until LeBron James arrived via draft in 2003 that optimism returned.



Coach Bill Fitch instructs the Cavaliers rookies on June 26, 1970. "We were starting from scratch, and I mean literally from scratch," Fitch recalls. (photo courtesy of the Cleveland Press Collection, Cleveland State University)

**2004-2010: The King's Era-** LeBron transformed everything—the Cavs went from underdogs to title contenders almost overnight! They won multiple Central Division titles while reaching their first NBA Finals appearance in 2007 before losing to San Antonio Spurs—a bittersweet moment for fans who had waited so long for success. Still the Cavs won 60+ games in 2009 and 2010. All seemed well until “The Decision” when LeBron James left for Miami in 2010.

**2011-2018: Redemption & Championship Glory-** Following LeBron's departure in 2010 and new struggles the Cavs experienced another rebuilding phase until LeBron James returned in 2014, teaming up with Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love. Together the team reached four straight Finals (2015 - 2018), and finally winning the 2016 NBA Championship!

**2019 - 2026: Rebound-** The team returned to the playoffs in the 2022-23 season, becoming a competitive Eastern Conference team once again, with the help of Donovan Mitchell. It's clear that although ups-and-downs continue defining the Cavs, they remain resilient competitors.

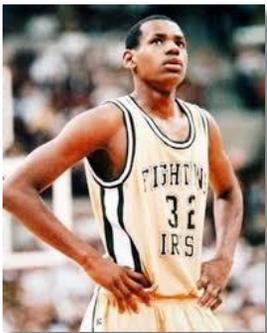


**ACTIVITY:**  
Design a brand new logo for the Cleveland Cavaliers. What could their new branding be for the year 2030?

# LeBron James

LeBron James is widely considered to be one of the greatest, if not the greatest basketball player of all time, earning him the nickname King James.

## SCHOOL BASKETBALL



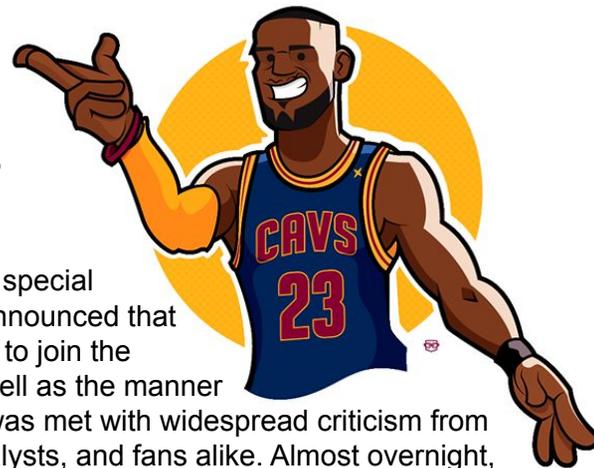
LeBron James in High School

Born in Akron, Ohio, in 1984, he began playing basketball at the age of nine. As a freshman at St. Vincent–St. Mary High School, he averaged 21 points per game in an undefeated season, and his team won the state’s Division III title. The next year, he was the first sophomore ever to be selected as Ohio’s Mr. Basketball, and the first sophomore ever selected for the USA Today All-USA First Team. The following season, he was the first junior ever named as the Gatorade National Player of the Year, and the first high school basketball player to appear on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. James

contemplated going professional at that point, but opted to finish his schooling instead. During his senior year, he averaged 31 points per game, had a high game of 52 points, and led his team to their third state championship.

## NBA ROOKIE

In 2003, he was named the National High School Player of the Year and was also selected by the Cleveland Cavaliers with the first pick of the NBA draft. James helped the Cavs to win 18 more games than the previous year, ended the season with a 20-point average, and was the first Cleveland player ever named NBA Rookie of the Year. In his second year, he set a new Cleveland single-game record (56 points) and was named to the All-NBA Team. In 2006, the Cavaliers qualified for the playoffs for the first time since 1998. And in 2007, they won their first-ever Eastern Conference championship, but lost in the Finals in a four-game sweep. The following season, James averaged 30 points a game, becoming Cleveland’s all-time leading scorer and the NBA’s top scorer for the year. In 2009 he was the first Cavalier ever chosen as the NBA’s MVP. The next year he received the same award, but unfortunately, James (and the team) did poorly in the playoffs.



## THE DECISION(S)

In July 2010, on a live ESPN special titled *The Decision*, James announced that he was leaving the Cavaliers to join the Miami Heat. This move, as well as the manner of the announcement itself, was met with widespread criticism from basketball professionals, analysts, and fans alike. Almost overnight,



James went from being one of America’s most popular athletes to one of the most disliked. Meanwhile, the Heat came to be seen as the villains of the NBA. Nonetheless, after struggling in the early season, the Heat ended up in the 2011 Finals. James himself played poorly in the Finals, and the team lost

in the sixth game. But the following two seasons the team won back-to-back championships, and James was named MVP for the third and fourth time.

After marrying his high school sweetheart, Savannah Brinson, and after one more season with Miami, LeBron James returned to Cleveland, a move that was widely praised. In his absence, the Cavaliers had been the lowest ranked team in the NBA. In his first season back, Cleveland made it to the finals, and in 2016 the Cavaliers came back from a 3-1 deficit to win the city’s first professional sports title in 52 years! The team also made it to the finals the next two years as well, but lost both series.

**ACTIVITY:** LeBron James is known for making long, essay-like announcements about his career. Imagine you either (A) are leaving your hometown for new opportunities or (B) have left your hometown and are coming back. What sort of letter would you write to explain it to people? How would you try to make them understand your decision?

In 2018 James left Cleveland to join the Los Angeles Lakers. His agent, Rich Paul, told *Sports Illustrated*, “In 2010, when he went to Miami, it was about championships. In 2014, when he went back to Cleveland, it was about delivering on a promise. In 2018, it was just about doing what

# LeBron James (cont.)

he wants to do.” In his first LA season, James was plagued with injuries, but the following year he won his fourth NBA championship, and his fourth Finals MVP award. In 2022 James became the highest-paid athlete in NBA history. In 2023 he became the all-time leading scorer in NBA history. He played in his fourth Olympics in 2024, winning his third gold medal. At 41, he is currently the oldest player in the NBA, and he has no plans to stop playing.

## A KING'S LEGACY

Standing 6 feet 9 inches tall and weighing 250 pounds, James has played the majority of his career as a forward. As an athletic and versatile player, he has been compared to Basketball Hall of Famers Oscar Robertson, Magic Johnson, and Michael Jordan. Throughout most of the 2010s, James was annually ranked as the best player in the NBA by ESPN and *Sports Illustrated*. Between 2011 and 2020 he played for three different teams in nine out of ten NBA Finals, winning four titles.

James is seen by many of his fellow NBA players, the media, and the general public as “the face of the NBA.” He has four times been listed by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world, more than any other professional athlete. He has been awarded 2 NAACP Image Awards. NBA analyst Brian Windhorst has said, “No one has ever had as much hype as James has had to live up to, and James has delivered on every last drop.”

James and wife Savannah have three children. Their eldest son, LeBron Jr or “Bronny,” was selected by the Lakers in the 2024 NBA draft, creating the first active father-son player duo in NBA history.

James has been active in Hollywood and owns multiple production companies. He is also involved in philanthropic work: in 2004, he and his mother Gloria founded the LeBron James Family Foundation which assists children and single-parent families in need. Players like LeBron James and Kevin Durant have been vocal advocates for social justice, using their platforms to raise awareness about issues such as police brutality and racial inequality.



LeBron James at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. (Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times)

**FULL NAME:** LeBron Raymone James  
**BORN:** December 30, 1984  
**BIRTHPLACE:** Akron, Ohio  
**SPOUSE:** Savannah James  
**CHILDREN:** LeBron Jr., Bryce, Zhuri



As of the 2025-26 NBA season, LeBron James is playing in his 23rd consecutive season. He is the first player in NBA history to reach this milestone, continuing to extend his record for longevity.

- Debut Season: 2003 - 04
- **TEAMS:** He has played on the Cleveland Cavaliers, Los Angeles Lakers, and Miami Heat
- Selected to play in 22 All-Star games
- **AWARDS:** Rookie of the Year, 4 MVP, 4 Finals MVP, 4 NBA championships: with the Miami Heat (2012, 2013) and the Cleveland Cavaliers (2016, 2020)
- **OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALS:** 3 Olympic gold medals (2008, 2012, 2024) and one bronze medal (2004) as a member of the USA Basketball team



# Memorable Moments

Several memorable moments in NBA history are mentioned in *King James*:

## 1992: THE JORDAN SHRUG

In game 1 of the 1992 Finals between the Chicago Bulls and the Portland Trail Blazers, Michael Jordan shot six consecutive three-point baskets - then an NBA record. The three-point shot was not one of Jordan's particular strengths (in the 1991-92 season he made just 27%). After the sixth basket, he glanced at Magic Johnson sitting in the stands and shook his head, grinning, as if to say, "I don't know how I did it either," and then shrugged. The moment has become iconic, known as "the Jordan shrug."

## 2003: LEBRON'S CHALK TOSS

During his first year with the Cleveland Cavaliers, James began a pre-game ritual in which he chalked up his hands, threw some powder in the air, watched it disappear, and then clapped. This quickly became a popular moment with fans and he continues to do so today.

## 2007: "HE CAME TO THE TRIBE GAME WITH A YANKEES HAT ON"

On October 5, 2007, LeBron James attended a baseball playoff game between the Cleveland Indians and the New York Yankees at Jacobs Field, the Indians' home stadium located just across the plaza from the Cavaliers' home arena. Sitting behind home plate, James, a long-time Yankees fan, wore a Yankees hat, causing a great deal of controversy. Fans had previously tolerated James's support of the much-hated Yankees, who had been the Indians' rival since the 1950s. But this appearance caused an uproar. Although Cleveland defeated the Yankees 12-3, most of the commentary after the game focused on James's disloyalty.

## 2014: "THE FIRE THEY BLOW OUT THE PIPES..."

On Oct. 27, 2014, the Cleveland Cavaliers unveiled their state-of-the-art scoreboard with LeBron's first game back as a Cleveland Cavalier since May 2010. The Cleveland Cavaliers' home court desperately needed a scoreboard upgrade to accompany the new energy LeBron James' return was bringing. The Humongotron was born: a state-of-the-art Jumbotron with pyrotechnic flame-spitting swords and new audio and visual systems for the entire building. It was the largest scoreboard in the NBA at the time.



## 2016: THE BLOCK

In Game 7 of the 2016 NBA Finals, with 1:56 remaining and the score tied at 89-89, Warriors forward Andre Iguodala rebounded the ball off the Cavaliers backboard and charged down the court, guarded by Cleveland's J. R. Smith. Iguodala passed half court and threw a pass to teammate Stephen Curry, who immediately bounced it back. Iguodala powered past Smith and shot. LeBron James, who had been trailing Iguodala and Smith the entire length of the floor, sprung at the ball from behind Iguodala and knocked the missed layup off the glass with 1:50 left. Smith rebounded the ball, and the Warriors failed to score another basket for the rest of the game, while the Cavaliers added 4 points to their total. James's block is cited as a key moment in deciding the outcome of the game, and is considered to be one of the greatest defensive plays in James's career and in NBA history. Today it is still referred to as "The Block."

## 2016: CLEVELAND COMES BACK FROM A 3-1 DEFICIT TO WIN THE NBA CHAMPIONSHIP

The Golden State Warriors defeated Cleveland in the first two games of the 2016 NBA finals. Cleveland won the third game, but the Warriors pulled away late in Game 4 to win at 108-97, taking a decisive 3-1 series lead. Then the Cavaliers won Games 5 and 6 (112-97 and 115-101), leading to a climactic Game 7. With the score tied at 89-89 and 53 seconds remaining, Kyrie Irving made a 3-point field goal, giving Cleveland the lead. At 10.6 seconds, LeBron James was fouled. He hit one of his two free throws, and the Warriors missed two follow-up shots, making the final score 93-89. Previously, no team had ever recovered from a 3-1 deficit in an NBA Finals series.

## 2016: THE CLEVELAND CHAMPIONSHIP PARADE

On Wednesday, June 22, 2016, three days after the final championship game, 1.3 million fans flocked to downtown Cleveland for what is still the largest championship celebration in NBA history. There were 77 units in the parade, which featured the Cavaliers, former Cleveland Browns star Jim Brown, Ohio State football coach Urban Meyer and the marching band, and more. The parade started late because of the huge crowds and lasted more than four hours. It was followed by a rally in Public Square with speeches from the mayor and LeBron James.

# The Science Behind Being a Fan

A **fan** or **fanatic**, sometimes also termed an **aficionado** or **enthusiast**, is a person who exhibits strong interest or admiration for something or somebody, such as a celebrity, a sport, a sports team, a genre, a politician, a book, a television show, a movie, a video game or an entertainer. All together, the fans of a particular object or person make up its fanbase or fandom.

While it may seem understandable that an athlete becomes attached to teammates and being part of a team, it is clear that sports spectators — those regulars sitting in the stands — can also become so passionate about their team that it becomes part of their identity and affects their well-being.

“People are tying up a lot of who they are in their identity as fan of X-team,” says Edward Hirt, associate professor of psychological and brain sciences at Indiana University- Bloomington, who has also conducted research on the psychology of sports fans. “A huge part of who they are, where they derive a lot of their positive and negative affect, is from what their team is doing.”

What is it about watching sports that possesses otherwise composed individuals to scream, obsess over statistics, and paint their faces — particularly when they know that there’s a very good chance that their team is going to lose?

Sports fan researchers emphasize this point: that sporting events are competitions in which it is guaranteed that one team must lose, which means that half the fans will be upset with the result. In other activities, those odds might not seem like a worthwhile investment of one’s time.

So being a fan can’t be all about a team’s winning performance. “Everyone is eventually going to lose,” says Hirt. “It’s clear that there has to be other benefits.”

## A Need to Belong

Although people report many reasons for following a favorite team, social connectedness is among the most frequently found, as discovered by Daniel Wann, professor of psychology at Murray State University, who has spent much of his career dedicated to research about sports spectators.

“When we look at motivation for following a sport team, group affiliation is one of the top ones,” says Wann. “Identifying strongly with a local team where other fans are in the environment — that’s a benefit to social-psychological well-being.” The venue, he says, provides an easy

way of interacting with other spectators, and the vast majority of fans, about 95 percent, attend games with friends.

In addition, highly identified fans tend to be socialized to sports early and view it not just as a game but also as a nostalgic or emotional experience. Many say that they can remember going to games as a child, or that games remind them of pleasant childhood memories.

The repetition of the sports seasons may be another thing that draws fans to the game. “There’s always the next season,” says Hirt, repeating a mantra sports fans are fond of repeating after an unsuccessful season.

## An Extension of Self

Team identification not only fosters a sense of social belonging, but also it impacts individual self-esteem.

In one study, Hirt and colleagues examined the effects of team allegiance on individuals’ beliefs about their own competence and self-esteem. They brought participants who reported being highly identified with their college basketball teams into the lab and showed them a tape of their teams either winning or losing. Afterwards, each participant was asked to predict how well he or she thought the team would do in the future. Participants were also asked to make unrelated estimates of their own performance on motor, mental, and social-skills tasks.

Fans who watched their team win reported significantly higher estimates of the team’s future performance, their own task performance, and their personal self-esteem than did those participants who watched their team lose. The boost that the winning-team group received was similar to the boost that participants received when they personally succeeded or failed at a task.

“The team is an extension of the self,” says Hirt.



# The Science Behind Being a Fan (cont.)



**ACTIVITY:** Aside from sports, there are many other kinds of fandoms. Are you a fan of a singer, artist or a band? Was there a personal connection that drew you to them?

## Loyalty Benefits the Loyal

Fans use psychological strategies to justify and maintain their passion — even when a team's performance is otherwise disappointing. "Sports fans have perfected methods of coping," says Wann. "If they weren't able to cope, there wouldn't be any sports fans." They may boost their self-esteem when the team wins by basking in reflected glory, wearing a team-logo shirt the next day, or talking about the game with coworkers at the office.

In a recent study, Wann and Rick Grieve, professor of psychology at Western Kentucky University, surveyed 148 fans from both teams as they were leaving a sporting event and asked them to rate their agreement with statements that their team's fans has exhibited good behavior and sportsmanship. They were then asked to evaluate the opposing team's fans. The results showed that fans — particularly those of the winning team — were more likely to say that the opposing team's fans displayed worse behavior than their own team's fans, a clear case of in-group bias.

When their team does poorly, however, they may also show biased perceptions against other people, such as the referees, the other team's players, or fans of the other team. Their recollection of events may also be inaccurate.

Those who are highly identified with their teams are motivated to use these coping strategies when their teams perform poorly. Because the team is part of their identity, they cannot deny themselves the team's importance.

Emphasizing loyalty to a team is another way fans can soothe themselves.

When their sports team fails, the highly identified fan might say to him- or herself, "I'm not like other people, I'm loyal in the face of all they've gone through," says Fisher. "When they are finally successful, everyone will see that I'm really smart."

At its core, *King James* is a play about friendship. Over the course of 12 years, the bond between Shawn and Matt develops, highlighting the challenges, complexity, and the importance of friendship. However, friendship is often difficult for adults - especially male-identifying adults

## So how do you make friends?

Below are some tools that experts suggest.

- Join a club. Being around the same people regularly can help you make friends.
- Embrace your interests. Go out and do the things you like to do in the world. Meet people who have similar interests.
- Embrace your heritage. Sometimes cultural groups can be a place to find new friends that have similar backgrounds to you.
- Start a conversation. Being brave and just striking up a conversation is always the first step.
- Be a good friend. Doing favors and being genuinely interested in others helps you know more about them.
- Go out into the world. Staying home means there are no chances to make new friends.

Remember: rejection is ok! Often we are afraid of someone might reject us, so we don't put ourselves out there. But chances are, the other person is just as nervous as you.

**ACTIVITY:** Do you have a close friend? If so, what do you have in common? Are there topics you avoid? Do you feel comfortable disagreeing with your friends? Why or why not?



# Meet the Cast



**ELI MAYER\*** (Matt) Eli (pronounced like "deli") is so excited to be joining the Pioneer Theatre family with this love letter to friendship and fandom. Off-Broadway: *Amid Falling Walls*. Regional credits include: *Fiddler on the Roof* (Atlanta Opera/Alliance Theatre); *Ride the Cyclone* (Arena Stage, McCarter Theatre); Aaron Posner's *The Chosen* (Cincinnati Playhouse, Milwaukee Rep); *Footloose* (The Muny, Maine State Music Theatre); *The Book Club Play* (Cincinnati Playhouse); *Indian Summer* (Bay Street Theatre); William Finn's *The Royal Family of Broadway* (Barrington Stage). TV/Film: *Power Book II: Ghost* (Starz) BFA from The University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music. Lifelong Celtics fan. Much love to family, friends, Miriam, Geoff, Rochel, and Ryan; my real-life Shawn. @elimayermaynot



**KHIRY WALKER\*** (Shawn) Regional: *Godspeed* (DCPA). Off-Broadway: *Sally and Tom* (The Public), *Much Ado About Nothing* (The Public), *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (Keen), *Three Musketeers* (CTH). TV: *The Chair Company*, *Law and Order: Organized Crime*. Podcast series: *Can You Dig It?* (Audible). So much gratitude for the privilege to be here with you.

