

## The New Face Of the NBA?

By Oscar Robertson

In some respects, the influence LeBron James has on the game of basketball was preordained. The NBA had been searching for, even trying to create, a new icon to help market the league. Fresh out of high school, the 6-ft. 8-in. James was viewed as the One. He signed a big contract with Nike, even as sales of many athlete-endorsed shoe lines were declining. James has had high expectations thrust upon him from the moment he was drafted.

It won't be easy living up to the hopes. While his talent has already established James, at age 20, as a bona fide star, he will need to be noncontroversial and politically correct, something even Michael Jordan took a while to learn. But in one respect, James could become even more influential than Jordan was. With so many players coming into the NBA fundamentally deficient, James' solid all-around skills can have a positive influence on kids and how they play the game. His improvement between his first and what is now his second season showed dedication and a desire to improve.

There will soon be pressure on James to lead Cleveland into the league's élite- and ultimately to a title. I went through the same thing with Cincinnati in the 1960s. While my statistics may have been impressive, the city would not be satisfied -- and certainly I would not be satisfied -- until I had a championship ring. It was only after I moved to Milwaukee that my team won a championship.

James seems to understand that this is a team game, that individuals do not win titles. He appears level-headed and graceful in dealing with his notoriety, his good fortune and the high expectations. It isn't easy because people in his position attract a lot of instant "friends."

James' next step, if he so chooses, is to become a leader and inspire his teammates to play better as a unit. Cleveland isn't there yet. As James matures, will he develop the confidence to lead the effort to improve the team? Or will he play out his contract and move to a franchise that knows how to put together consistent winners? Either way, many consider him the new face of the NBA.

*Hall of Famer Robertson is the NBA all-time leader in triple-doubles.*