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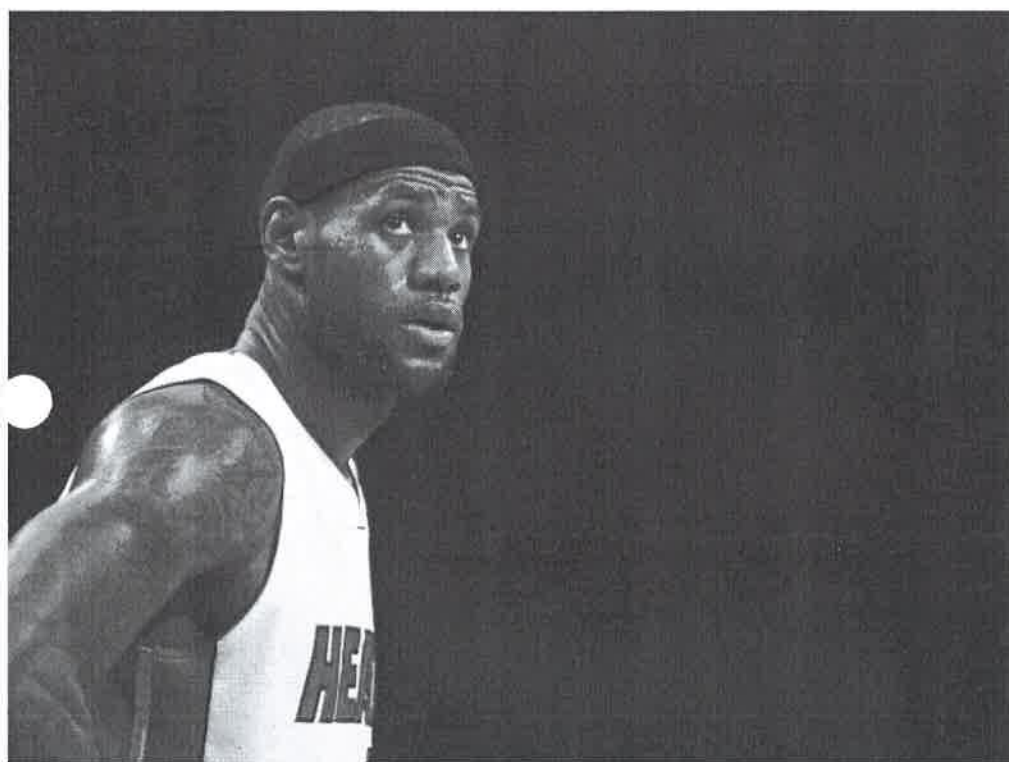
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## Why LeBron James gets uncomfortable in order to keep getting better



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LeBron James has decided to try and be the best NBA player ever, and it appears the only person who can stop him is himself.

Al Bello/Getty Images

TORONTO — There's a cameraman who has been filming NBA games on the baseline in Toronto for years, and somewhere in all those endless games he noticed something about LeBron James. When he came down court, his eyes were wide open and they ricocheted like pinballs, darting back and forth, decoding. "It's like his eyes were running," the cameraman says. "I never noticed it with anybody else. Just him."

The Miami Heat rolled into Toronto on Tuesday night as the two-time defending champions, and LeBron rolled in as a singular player. He has won four of the last five MVP awards, and reached three straight NBA Finals. He has finally said he's trying for greatest player ever. He's trying to decode something bigger, now.

Toronto Raptors' Rudy Gay on the hot seat with LeBron James, Miami Heat in town

"One of the unique qualities about him is that drive, is that fear of failure, that push to make himself uncomfortable to get to a different level," says Miami's coach, Eric Spoelstra. "Two years ago when he won MVP and after our first title, people said that's the

highest level he could play at. It was the highest level he had played at in his career, he was coming off the Finals where we lost. But you take somebody with his talent, and add incredible drive, and an excellent work ethic, it doesn't make sense to put a ceiling on him."

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Miami's six-game loss to Dallas in the 2011 Finals featured a LeBron who got lost in fourth quarters, who froze. The architect of Dallas's defence, of course, was current Toronto Raptors coach Dwane Casey. He built the last thing to truly consume LeBron, a web of zones and double-teams and looks. Spoelstra and his staff watched the games well into the lockout, trying to figure them out. Spoelstra says it made them better coaches.

"It was a very painful experience for us," Spoelstra says. "That [defence] wasn't what put them over. That was one of the things where we didn't step up to the challenge. But anybody that was on that staff or on that team we will always have ultimate respect for ... I won't thank him, but it's in my mind. He knows that I know."

LeBron, meanwhile, has called that Finals "the enough-is-enough turning point" for him; in an interview with ESPN to start this season, he talked about his deep fear of failure, how he wanted to succeed so badly he could get gripped by that fear. The 2011 Finals was his biggest failure.



The defence presented by the Dallas Mavericks and current Raptors coach Dwane Casey had LeBron James perplexed during the 2011 NBA Finals. Ronald Martinez/Getty Images

And since then, the 28-year-old has grown into a league-altering monster of a player. His adjusted shooting percentage, accounting for the value of three-pointers, went from a then-career high of .541 to .554 to .603, good for second in the NBA. His three-point shooting went from .330 to .362 to .406. His passing improved, to the point that Casey now says double-teams are disasters waiting to happen. He points to little holes that were patched, like how LeBron can drive left from the left side and get all the way to the rim now, instead of the old near-automatic pull-up jumper. LeBron built himself bigger.

And against Toronto on Tuesday, James found cracks and created cracks. He threw one no-look pass to Dwyane Wade that was like a shortcut through reality. Other than a dribbling display in the fourth that drew gasps and then boos — he pulled it back out after befuddling Landry Fields — it all looked so simple, so easy. Thirty-five points, eight rebounds, eight assists, one turnover, one block, 13 of 20 shooting, 8 of 8 from the line, in 36 minutes.

"LeBron really took to heart his performance against Dallas," Heat forward Shane Battier says. "A lot of players may shrink from that. He grew."

"I try to get better each and every season, try to get better at every aspect of the game, step outside my comfort zone," James says. "You know, things that I may not have done the year before, that I wasn't comfortable with, and get better at it, and be the best player I can be." When someone says he must be running out of things to improve, he arches an eyebrow on that wide Aztec sculpture of a face. "Oh, is that right?" he says, smiling.

"Just know I'm getting better. I'm getting better. I know it sounds crazy every time I say that, but this is the third year I've said it, and it's the third straight year I've gotten better."

He's grown so much over his years in the NBA as far as reading defences, reading the zones, reading switches, double teams," Casey

says. "He's a lot like Michael [Jordan], from that standpoint. There's no defence he hasn't seen. Now he can react to it without having a timeout or a day of practice.

"^nd then he was under so much pressure; now that he's won championships he's playing relaxed, he's having fun."

I "Now Dwyane [Wade], on the other hand, has an incredible chip on his shoulder, and a drive," Spoelstra says. "He wasn't recruited by anybody, he had to go to Marquette, he was a Prop 48 [sitting out his freshman year for academic reasons], nobody knew who he was. He came into this league, people wrote him off. And every single day he's been trying to make a point that, 'I'm going to be remembered. *You are going to remember me.*' That is quite different. >

"And LeBron, from the seventh grade on, has lived in a world that none of us can relate to. He's been anointed as the best player. That can usually distort your perception of what matters, and how much you should be working. He understands the whole puzzle in terms of not only individual work, where he's going to push himself, but to be out here every day. Shootarounds, practices, film sessions, he's lacing 'em up. He doesn't always feel great, but he's going to be there to make this thing work."

I'm chasing what I can potentially do. And that's a goal I have for myself. At the end of the day I can't rank myself where I want in NBA history; that's for everyone else to do

And piece by piece, LeBron is building a case that truly began when Casey's defence befuddled him, when he froze in the face of failure, when this meticulously built superman came apart in front of the world. Enough was enough.

"Well, I'm not chasing Michael," James says. "I'm chasing what I can potentially do. And that's a goal I have for myself. At the end of the day I can't rank myself where I want in NBA history; that's for everyone else to do. But I have the potential to be really good at this game, and I don't want to take no shortcuts, and I don't want to take it for granted."

neone asked where his ceiling was. He glanced up at the comfortable rafters of the visiting locker room, and smiled again. "I don't know," LeBron said. "It's higher than this."

*With files from Eric Koreen*

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