

NBA Finals

Round 2: LeBron, Curry square off again in Finals

By JON KRAWCZYNSKI
Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — LeBron versus Steph. King James versus the Baby-faced Assassin. Nike versus Under-Armour.

Any way you slice it, it's a dream matchup for the league in the NBA Finals. Again.

A second straight championship showdown between LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers and Stephen Curry and the Golden State Warriors puts the league's two brightest stars on its biggest stage.

It could also mark the beginnings of a new rivalry between the long-time face of the league and the shooting supernova threatening to supplant him.

"It's really annoying for me. That's not what I'm playing for, to be the face of the NBA or to be this or that or to take LeBron's throne or whatever," Curry said Wednesday, one day before the Warriors host the Cavs in Game 1. "You know, I'm trying to chase rings, and that's what I'm all about. So that's where the conversation stops for me."

• **Game 1 tonight:**
Cleveland at Golden State
6 p.m. (ABC)

Curry got his first last year, at James' expense. And there have been subtle signs of a brewing rivalry ever since.

As the Curry hype was building during the Warriors' run to the title last season, James went out of his way to proclaim himself "the best player on the planet" during the finals. He played like it, too, averaging 35.8 points, 13.3 rebounds and 8.8 assists while carrying a Cavs team missing Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love through six games in the series.

After Curry won his second MVP award this season in unanimous fashion — something no other player, including four-time winner James, had ever done — James offered a nuanced take on the achievement.

James said Curry's numbers were tremendous, "but when you talk about most 'valuable' then you can have a different conversation, so, take nothing away from him, he's definitely deserving of that award, for sure."



AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez

Golden State Warriors' Stephen Curry gestures on the court during NBA basketball practice Wednesday, June 1, 2016, in Oakland, Calif. The Warriors host the Cleveland Cavaliers in Game 1 of the NBA finals on Thursday.

On Wednesday, James expanded, saying "Steph was definitely the MVP of our league."

"You guys make rivals," James said. "I think it's great for the sport. It's great for all sports. I don't think me and Steph, when you talk about rivalries, you talk about Carolina-Duke, you talk about Ohio State-Michigan. It's hard to say LeBron and Steph. If there's a smaller scale or

a 40-inch (vertical) and be the fastest guy on the floor."

There are similarities between the locomotive and the lightning bolt.

They have reached the stratosphere within the league and global sporting conscience, have made their teammates better by virtue of their unparalleled skills and can take over a game in the blink of an eye. They also both were born in Akron, in the same hospital no less.

But there is not a lot of real estate to be sold on the common ground between James and Curry.

James has been a star since puberty, growing up with a single mother and under the glare created by the Sports Illustrated spotlight. No cover jinx there. He was the consensus No. 1 draft choice in 2004 and has fulfilled all of that promise and then some while asserting himself as the league's conscience with his willingness to speak boldly on social issues.

The limelight hasn't always been comfortable. James has been scrutinized as much as any athlete in his era, each tweet parsed for deeper meaning, each loss in the finals offered as a shortcoming.

"I think I've exceeded expectations in my life as a professional," James said. "I'm a statistic that was supposed to go the other way, growing up in the inner city, having a single-parent household. It was just me and my mother. So everything I've done has been a success."

Curry grew up in the affluence created by father Dell's 16-year NBA career with all the advantages but the size. He was overlooked by the power colleges and chosen seventh overall in 2010 because many scouts weren't sure if he would be big enough and quick enough to play in the league.

Now he has put an entire shoe company on the map, led the Warriors to a record 73 regular-season wins and has kids the world over mimicking the way he heads back up the court without watching his shot splash through the hoop.

"The casual fan might relate better to Steph because he doesn't have that athletic just God-given ability," Thompson said. "It's tough to say. It's just personal preference, honestly."

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