

**Total Recall: LeBron's mighty mind**  
**Brian Windhorst** ESPN.com | July 22, 2014

Playing video games with LeBron James is so annoying.

"When we were growing up we used to play this fighting game on the Sega Genesis called Shaq Fu," says Brandon Weems, James' lifelong friend. "LeBron was the only one who had memorized all the moves and so he'd win every time. We all thought he definitely was cheating."

Memorizing all the manipulations with the joystick and the A, B and C buttons back in the days before it could be Googled -- the Inferno Kick was down, toward the player, with the C button pressed, but only with the "Shaq" character, mind you -- is one thing. When James started adding the pathological layers as he got older, that's when he really started messing with his friends.

"When you play Madden with him now you have to be careful which teams you take, because he will know what your game plans were in the past when you've played with him and he'll pick the opposing team knowing what plays you want to run," says Weems, now an assistant basketball coach at Oakland University.

"You better save your favorite play, too, because he'll remember what you ran before in situations and be ready for it. Your only hope is to save it until the end and try to surprise him with it."

It's a midgame timeout during a 2013-14 regular-season game at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, long before James decided to return to the Cleveland Cavaliers, and the national television broadcast means it's longer than usual.

Erik Spoelstra is sitting in front of his Heat players on the bench as he traces a play on his dry-erase board with a fading blue marker. The players -- Dwyane Wade, Chris Bosh, Ray Allen and Udonis Haslem -- are draped in towels, holding cups of water, waiting for Spoelstra to present his play. James is quiet, holding clippers, working on cleaning up the nails on his left hand.

Only he's not.

"No," James says to Spoelstra, reaching his hand out and touching the board on Spoelstra's lap, pointing to something. "He has to be here, like this." James traces his finger along the surface. He has been in this situation before against the Pacers. The Heat have tried this play. He has an instant alteration in mind. James is animated now, having forgotten his nails, as he presents his case for why this way will work.

Spoelstra grabs his eraser.

Another huddle now, earlier in the season, and the Heat are having troubling dealing with pick-and-roll coverage. A candid discussion has broken out among players and coaches about what changes to make in the middle of the game.

"Let's do it this way," James tells his teammates, "like we did in Game 3 against Dallas."

The change is made. Later, Spoelstra will find himself reviewing the moment, searching his memories, and he'll realize the Heat did indeed play that way against Dallas. "I was like, c'mon, that was from a game three years ago," Spoelstra says, before raising his fingers and making a crisp snap. "And he recalled it just like that."

It's the middle of February now, in a game against the Golden State Warriors, and James is walking the ball down the floor with the seconds running out. The Heat are down two points and he's dribbling the final nine seconds off the clock with ace defender Andre Iguodala guarding him. James fakes a drive, then steps back and to his left in time to fire in a game-winning 3-pointer over Iguodala's fingers with 0.1 seconds left.

In the jovial postgame locker room, it's pointed out to James by a reporter that almost exactly five years earlier, he'd won a game with a jumper at Oracle Arena at the buzzer from virtually the same exact spot at the same basket.

"Not really," James says in response. "That one was probably about six feet closer to the baseline and inside the 3-point arc. It was over Ronny Turiaf, I stepped back on him but I crossed him over first and got him on his heels. I'm sure of it. It was down the sideline a few feet. It was a side out-of-bounds play; this one we brought up."

Within moments, James is watching that very 2009 highlight on a cell phone while icing his aching feet. And indeed, there it is -- the crossover step-back on Turiaf from, oh, about six feet to the left of the shot he'd just hit over Iguodala. Right along the sideline inside the 3-point line. A side out-of-bounds play. Just like he said.

He is 6-foot-8 or so, and 260 pounds or so. He has striking athleticism even while in a crowd of some of the greatest athletes on the planet. He has a strong work ethic that manifests itself in expansive summer programs that are at the heart of the steady development of his game over the years. He is ambidextrous, playing right-handed but doing most other things in his life left-handed, a trait that has helped him become one of the great scorers in league history. He has an expansive interest in the history of the game, which he uses both as a teaching resource and to generate motivation in a time where he has very few true contemporaries.

There is all of that. But there is also one other quality, one that James himself has somehow managed to keep hidden for the past decade, despite our seemingly insatiable desire to uncover -- and wring dry -- most everything about the man: the memory. It is perhaps one of James' greatest gifts. And while those who watch James are typically impressed with how he uses his speed and skill to generate highlight plays, those who know James or spend a lot of time with him are more frequently blown away by the almost curious power of his mind.

The memory. It can inform him. It can engage him. It can turn on him. It can attack him. It can, he says, hinder him in ways that are far harder to treat than a sprained ankle. And learning to control it has been a fight as great as any other in his career.

"When I was a kid my coaches started to say to me that I remembered things that happened in games from a few tournaments back -- and that surprised them," James says. "I started to realize how important that could be years later, probably when I was in high school. And then, eventually, I realized that it can get me into trouble."

It's 2012, and James is asked after a game to name the most memorable dunks in his career. Listing them quickly off the top of his head -- his slam on poor Damon Jones, or when he leaped over the top of John Lucas III -- is not all that impressive. The Rolling Stones will never forget the words and chords to "Gimme Shelter." Most players remember their greatest hits. What's remarkable is everything else: His ability, that day, to recall who was guarding the player who threw him an alley-oop pass from across the floor (James' favorite alley-oop came on a pass from Daniel Gibson over the arms of Antonio Daniels, he says). Or how an opponent might have gotten away with a hand-check foul on the play before a dunk four years earlier (these often involve Kevin Garnett).

"Sometimes when we come into our morning meetings on game days NBA TV will be on and there will be some classic game on," Heat guard Mario Chalmers says. "LeBron will take one look at it and know what game it is. He'll be like, 'Oh, that's Game 2 of the '97 Finals,' before they even put it on the screen."

Consider: After the University of Connecticut won the national championship in April, James made a point to compliment Huskies coach and former teammate Kevin Ollie on the accomplishment. "He still looks the same in a suit on the sideline coaching for the Huskies as he did for us wearing No. 12," James said.

Ollie played with James for one season: his rookie year in 2003-04 in Cleveland. He played for 13 teams in his career and wore seven different numbers. And yes, a review of the historical record shows, Ollie did indeed wear No. 12 for the Cavs.

"Look, we're all professional basketball players, so when LeBron remembers something from a basketball game, even if it's from a few years ago, it doesn't exactly blow me away," Bosh says. "But it's when he remembers other stuff, like stuff he shouldn't even know, where you're like, 'What?!' We'll be watching a football game and he'll be like, 'Yeah, that cornerback was taken in the fourth round of the 2008 draft from Central Florida,' or something. And I'll be like, 'How do you know that?' And he'll be like, 'I can't help it.'"

So what does it mean? What it seems to suggest -- at least the part of it that James will discuss -- is that if you give up the baseline to James on a drive in November 2011 and he's playing against you in March 2013, the Heat small forward will remember it. It means that if you tried to change your pick-and-roll coverage in the middle of the fourth quarter of the 2008 playoffs, he'll be ready for you to try it again in 2014, even if you're coaching a different team. It also means that if you had a good game the last time you played against Milwaukee because James got you a few good looks in the first quarter, the next time you play the Bucks you can count on James looking for you early in the game. Because, you know, the memory never forgets.

"I can usually remember plays in situations a couple of years back -- quite a few years back sometimes," James says. "I'm able to calibrate them throughout a game to the situation I'm in, to know who has it going on our team, what position to put him in.

"I'm lucky to have a photographic memory," he will add, "and to have learned how to work with it."

If there's one thing that can be said about the study of the human brain -- and especially the field of memory -- it's that even today, it's notable less for what is known than for how much is *not* known. The workings of our head-sponges remain, for the most part, a mystery. But if there are areas of consensus in the field of neurology, one of them is that the notion of "photographic memory," in which a person can take mental snapshots and recall every detail at a later time, has never been proved to exist.

This is not to say that James is lying when he describes his total recall. The evidence appears strong that his memory banks are loaded up like Fort Knox. Rather, what James might be describing appears more likely to be a version of "eidetic memory," which is, essentially, the medical term for crazy, crazy freakish recall. And although eidetic memory appears to take many forms -- some claim to be able to "read" pages in their mind, others to "replay" their memories as if pressing play on streaming video -- those who claim the ability often share one trait: They are as cursed by it as they are blessed by it.

When an entire life is perpetually available, that life exists, in a sense, forever in present tense. And sifting through a perpetual and onrushing flood of memories? That's apparently less fun than it sounds.

It's hard, after all, to erase bad memories when you can't erase any of them at all.

It's June 2013, and James is riding back to the team hotel after Game 3 of the NBA Finals in San Antonio, with the Spurs having crushed the Heat by 36 points to take a 2-1 series lead. James was 7-of-21 shooting this night and in the midst of a poor Finals performance. Over the first three games, he was shooting just 38 percent and averaging 16.6 points, stunningly low numbers after what has been inarguably the finest season of his career. On the bus, he turns and confides to a friend.

"I'm thinking too much," James says, "about 2007."

It's 2007, and James has been humbled by the Spurs in a four-game sweep in the Finals. Coach Gregg Popovich has not respected the ability of the Cavs' 23-year-old phenom to shoot, no matter what James had done to the Pistons in the Eastern Conference finals the week before. So Popovich backs his defense off, ordering his players to encircle the paint and make James prove he can execute from the outside.

He cannot. James shoots a miserable 36 percent in the series. His shaky jumper is unable to deliver under pressure. It's a crushing series for James, who looks like an undergrad who's arrived at a final exam for which he's forgotten to study. At the conclusion of Game 4, with the wound still fresh, James swears he will radically adjust his level of focus and his attention to detail.

And so he does. Over the course of the next six years, James becomes a vastly better shooter, statistically one of the finest in the game, before adding layers to his post game in the following years, racking up three more visits to the Finals, four Most Valuable Player trophies and a title ...

And still it is, in 2013, with Popovich returning to the exact same game plan from six years prior, that James is finding he isn't just battling the strategy, but rather the baggage of those long-ago missed jumpers. The memory does not forget. James is by now a completely different player, more mature, more polished and confident. But as he looks down at that Spurs defensive set, his head can't help it, the hard drive producing the files it has already downloaded without asking for permission first. The memory replays a string of prior decisions, all leading to a series of negative outcomes, one atop the other, locking him in stasis when he needs action, most of all.

"At times his memory can be a bad thing," Spoelstra said. "Because he remembers his failures, too."

Consider what you know of the 2011 NBA Finals. And now consider it, instead, like this: In what will likely be remembered as the low point of his career, James is miserable for several games against the Dallas Mavericks -- including a vitally important Game 4 collapse when he somehow scores just eight points in 46 minutes. At times during that game it appears as if James is in a trance.

"What is he thinking?" the basketball world wonders.

James -- with two titles and counting, and four straight trips to the Finals -- can admit today what he's thinking in 2011: He's thinking of everything. Everything good, and everything bad. In 2011, he isn't just playing against the Mavs; he's also battling the demons of a year earlier, when he failed in a series against the Boston Celtics as the pressure of the moment beat him down. It's Game 5 of the 2010 Eastern Conference semifinals, and it is, to this point, perhaps the most

incomprehensible game of James' career. His performance is so lockjawed, so devoid of rhythm, the world crafts its own narrative, buying into unfounded and ridiculous rumors because they seem more plausible than his performance. James, though, never fully deals with any of that. Instead, he changes teams. Changes cities. Changes coaches. Changes owners. Changes teammates. Changes uniforms. Changes climate. Wipe the slate clean, and maybe, for once, he can leave the past behind.

Instead, when it all happens again a year later, James' recall turns against him, yet again, like an awful sequel to an awful original movie -- everything happening out of James' control, the awful computer in his head winning the inner monologue.

"There are a lot of things that go through my mind during a game," James says. "Sometimes I cloud my mind too much. I get to thinking about the game too much instead of just playing."

It's 2014, and James is atop the game -- a triumph a decade in the making, each letdown having given way to incremental growth. But perhaps the most overlooked battle in his personal war has been the campaign to control his thoughts and corresponding fears.

In 2011, after weeks of residing in a self-constructed bunker after the loss to Dallas, James realizes that he must close off parts of his brain to make it happen, play some tricks on his mind. Addition by distraction. And in 2012, when the playoffs come again, he shuts off his phone, stops watching TV, stops reading the Internet. He starts reading novels like "The Hunger Games," his free time focused on Katniss Everdeen instead of the fallout and consequences of his many past mistakes.

It's an understood routine by now, so understood that there's even an app for that -- one that lets fans get their James social media fix while he's in his postseason unplugged mode. His reading material is passed on in reporters' notes columns without fanfare. (His most recent read, for those hosting LeBron James Book Clubs, is "The Meaning of Life," by Bradley Trevor Greive.)

All of which has made it easy to take for granted -- and to minimize the condition that lingers behind the prescription. In fact, one of the greatest moves in James' career might well have been his realization last year that he was letting the flood of images and bad feelings from 2007 grip him in 2013. The memory was invading. But James was not about to give up ground he had already seized, and he grasped that in time to save it.

"That's the challenge," James says, "because you play so many different situations in your head throughout the game that sometimes it could [be hard] getting into what's really important."

And so, in 2013, James fights back -- calling on other files, more positive ones. He recovers for a dominating back half of the Finals to beat the Spurs, scoring 32 points in Game 6 and a brilliant 37 in Game 7, when he buries fearless jump shots despite immense pressure to deliver. Had Ray Allen not hit the unlikeliest of 3-pointers in Game 6, of course, the narrative might have turned on James yet again. Still, the way James sees it, the memory is now a weapon that, like his others, has only grown more potent -- and less problematic.

"It's allowed me to see things before they happen, put guys in position, kind of read my teammates, knowing who is out of rhythm, who is in rhythm, knowing the score, the time, who has it going on the other end, knowing their likes and dislikes and being able to calibrate all that into a game situation," James says. "That's very challenging, but it comes natural. It can help your team out."

It is quite an experience to watch a game along with James. He will occasionally call out plays another team is about to run, yelling, "Watch the back door," just before Chris Paul fires a strike to Blake Griffin for a dunk. Aided by a matrix of television screens at his home, James will often watch multiple games at once, and his study of the league can make him seem like a soothsayer. What is the New Orleans Pelicans' pet play out of timeouts? Where does DeMar DeRozan like to get the ball late in the shot clock? James has seen it. He knows it. And he will be ready when his mind needs it.