

Tracy McGrady's career speaks for itself, but Hall validation would be nice

In middle school, I didn't know a lot about basketball. Or about anything, really. If WikiHow ever wanted to make me instantly unemployable, all they'd have to do is uncover my search history on their website regarding how to ask girls out.

However, there was one thing that I did know for sure during those years: Tracy McGrady was **really** good at basketball.

We went through some McGrady remembrances in 2013 after he officially retired from the NBA, but just a couple of weeks ago it was announced that he had been nominated for the Basketball Hall of Fame, so we got another chance to think about him, this time with the knowledge that his career was externally validated at some level by the Hall.

As a kid growing up in Orlando when McGrady was at his Magic apex, I felt like McGrady never needed any external validation. Sure, we can recite many of the epic moments that everyone knows now by heart: 13 points in 35 seconds, 62 vs. the Wizards, the dunk on Shawn Bradley, the self-ooop in the All-Star Game, etc. But for Orlando kids, the feelings were perhaps a bit more visceral. The smoothness and ruthless devastation of his pull-up jumpers (you better believe I practiced that slight leg kick on the driveway hoop) and his body control to finish at any angle around the rim (no matter how long he'd been in the air already) let us know that we could believe in big things, even in a town that everyone associates with fun and generally not being serious. That sleepy look on his face let us know that we shouldn't be afraid to make those big things look easy.

We also knew that whenever T-Mac played, the Magic had a chance to beat anyone because he was almost always the best player on the floor, a critical advantage for every game in the star-driven NBA.

But of course, even though McGrady exceeded all reasonable expectations that could be foisted upon any given player, something about his career still felt unfulfilling (fair or not; FYI, it's not). Just like many of us can recite his greatest moments by heart, arguably more people know about the fact that he never led a team out of the first round of the playoffs. What's clear is that the "never got out of the first round" fact hangs over every discussion of McGrady's skills as a player. What's also clear is that this fact likely planted some doubts in his own mind about whether he was Hall-worthy; go watch the video again – McGrady surely knows that he was good enough for the Hall (95.5% chance of eventual Hall induction, according to Basketball Reference), but is rendered speechless when told about his nomination.

What's less clear is whether "never got out of the first round" **should** lower our assessment of his skills, or whether it should merely be interpreted as a fluky oddity in the career of a great player.

Commented [DC1]: <http://www.espn.com/video/clip?id=18327436>

Commented [DC2]: http://www.basketball-reference.com/leaders/hof_prob.html

McGrady suffered bad luck at seemingly every turn in his career. In 2000, he left a promising Toronto Raptors team to pave his own way with the Magic. That move in and of itself is understandable, especially when considering the fact that an at-his-prime Grant Hill was set to pair up with him in Orlando (also, don't forget how close Tim Duncan was to signing with the Magic too!! Holy sh*t, considering how weak the East was during those years, the Magic would've probably played in at least three straight Finals if Duncan signed with the Magic. Trust me, it would've been *at least* that; for research, I played a Hill-McGrady-Duncan NBA Live Franchise Mode with the Magic and McGrady won five straight MVPs).

Commented [DC3]: <http://deadspin.com/remember-when-tim-duncan-almost-signed-with-the-magic-1783459449>

Of course, the Raptors ended up nearly advancing to the Eastern Conference Finals during the very next season (lost 4-3 to the 76ers in the 2001 conference semis), the first of McGrady's many missed second-round opportunities. It's not hard to imagine McGrady being the difference that could've lifted the Raptors in that series as well. "...no doubt we could have contended for a championship. I think about that often," McGrady told The Star in 2013 regarding those Raptors teams that he left behind.

Commented [DC4]: https://www.thestar.com/sports/basketball/2013/09/13/tracy_mcgrady_wishes_he_had_stayed_in_toronto_feschuk.html

McGrady's star took a meteoric rise in Orlando where he made four straight All-NBA teams (two 1st teams, two 2nd teams), including a 2002-2003 season that ranks as the 18th-best individual season ever according to PER (30.27). However, his team-related misfortunes continued to haunt him. The sign-and-trade for Grant Hill ended up with the Magic needlessly giving up eventual four-time Defensive Player of the Year Ben Wallace (think the Magic could have used him in the paint instead of Patrick Ewing and Shawn Kemp, who were each already too old for at least two years before coming to Orlando?). What was supposed to be a three-headed monster of versatile 6'8 playmakers (McGrady, Hill, and Mike Miller), which would have competed for the East even without Wallace, never came to fruition because of Hill's health and Miller's eventual trade in 2003. His teammates during the 2003-2004 season literally made him want to quit basketball (Open Court segment).

Commented [DC5]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-oyqquepWY>

And of course, there are the three first-round playoff losses in Orlando that started the questions about whether McGrady had the "heart" to lead a winning team. Teammate Michael Doleac called his work ethic into question, stating that McGrady got by on sheer talent. McGrady's sleepy look sometimes gave the impression that he wasn't competitive and perhaps didn't care.

But if you go read up on those early-2000s Magic playoff losses, McGrady often stepped his game *up* when the lights were brightest, despite being the only Magic player anyone had to worry about. Did he not always work as hard as he should have? That might be true, but then again, there are some players still considered all-time greats despite questionable work ethic (e.g., Shaquille O'Neal).

In fact, it's a fun exercise to think about how a hypothetical McGrady-Shaq pairing would have worked out and changed perceptions. Remember, in the early 2000s, "T-Mac or Kobe?" was a very legitimate question (and Kobe himself said in 2013 that McGrady was the toughest player he's ever faced). Neither McGrady or Shaq were the hardest workers, but their playing together

Commented [DC6]: <http://grantland.com/the-triangle/an-intimate-night-with-kobe-bryant-and-5000-of-his-closest-friends/>

probably could have worked out better than Shaq-Kobe because T-Mac wouldn't have fought with Shaq for control of the team like Kobe did. McGrady was never meant to be an alpha-dog super scorer, but instead a do-it-all playmaker; the Orlando situation forced him into a role that he shouldn't have had to take on, especially so early in his career (Bill Simmons analyzes here).

Commented [DC7]: <http://grantland.com/features/the-unfortunate-tale-t-mac/>

Think about how you'd perceive McGrady if he had the luxury of playing with Kobe's teammates and coaches. All of a sudden, after what would likely be more than three titles together (because they stick together longer than Shaq-Kobe did), the questions about work ethic are less prominent. What seemed to be a sleepy/disengaged demeanor now is the look of a cold, calculating killer who only looks lazy because he's always so far ahead of the game and is waiting for everyone to catch up (per Isiah Thomas on Open Court, who drafted McGrady). Nothing about McGrady's inherent individual attributes changes (and his negatives are no less real), but the perception is completely different. That's a major clue toward figuring out that his never getting out of the first round is more an anomaly than an indictment.

Commented [DC8]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvFJU-2zif4>

(with a few more titles, we might've even forgiven Shaq for robbing us of 1 hour and 34 minutes of our lives with Kazaam)

After the Magic's disastrous 2003-2004 season, McGrady demanded a trade from Orlando right before the Magic drafted franchise cornerstone Dwight Howard and Grant Hill finally played a decent share of games (67). During his tenure with the Houston Rockets, his team only advanced past the first round during the 2008-2009 season in which he and Yao Ming suffered season-ending injuries.

After bouncing around for a few years (even in China, where he's very popular), it was in 2013 when McGrady found himself in San Antonio where ironically, he was the farthest he'd ever been in the playoffs while being at the lowest point of his athletic powers. But as opposed to labeling him pejoratively as a "ring chaser," it seemed like many fans were happy that McGrady would have a chance to own a championship ring with the Spurs. The 2013 NBA Finals were like a video game cheat code that would deliver a long-overdue career power-up for one of our game's greatest players (even if he was a benchwarmer by then). During those Finals, McGrady reportedly simulated LeBron James in Spurs practices, a poetic ending to a career in which McGrady was perhaps as good an approximation of LeBron as we've seen in a while. The ring, even if McGrady wasn't instrumental in earning it, would've felt like justice.

Commented [DC9]: <http://www.basketballinsiders.com/tracy-mcgradys-jersey-retired-in-china/>

Commented [DC10]: <http://sports.yahoo.com/blogs/nba-ball-dont-lie/tracy-mcgrady-playing-role-lebron-james-spurs-practices-005513078.html>

Of course, as fate would have it, the Spurs didn't win the Finals that year. Of course McGrady's career had to end like that. But McGrady shouldn't need that ring for us to appreciate him. That's an insult to his career and to our intelligence. He (nominally) fell short against LeBron, but he shouldn't need to beat LeBron (again, nominally) in order to receive the recognition he deserves. For most people who really watched him, a Hall induction isn't even really necessary to validate him.

But given the cruel twists of fate he was dealt during his career, the Hall of Fame would be a nice capstone. Tracy McGrady was one of the most sublime talents we've ever seen. He wasn't without shortcomings, but don't get cute: T-Mac was really f___ing great at basketball.

Even I – who didn't know anything else in middle school – knew that.