

***The Interview***  
*Joel Embiid Believes He  
Could Have Been the GOAT*





**By David Marchese**

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If all goes according to plan, the star-laden American men's basketball team will romp to a gold medal at the Paris Olympic Games next month. Which means that for one of the team's linchpins, the Philadelphia 76ers star Joel Embiid, the most complicated challenge may have been choosing to play for the United States in the first place.

Embiid, who is 30, is a native of Cameroon who also holds French and American citizenship. France aggressively courted Embiid, and his decision to instead join the U.S. team led to withering criticism from the French basketball community. (Cameroon's team did not qualify for this year's Games.)

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But things never go easily for Embiid. He is one of the sport's best players but also something of a Sisyphean figure. For all his success — including an M.V.P. award in 2023 and multiple scoring titles — he has never achieved the N.B.A.'s biggest prize: a championship. The Sixers have repeatedly fallen short in the playoffs, at times in heartbreaking fashion. Then there's the churn: During his tenure, the team has seen coaches, star players and general managers come and go. And Embiid himself can't

seem to avoid injury. (Shortly after Embiid and I spoke, the 76ers did sign another star player, Paul George. So there's reason to hope, Philly fans!)

That combination of iffy management and just plain bad luck have cast the shadow of unfulfilled potential over Embiid's decade-long career. So in some ways, the Games are a chance for a little redemption. Although based on his past experience, Embiid told me he is expecting adversity instead.

**Can you talk about what it means for you to be playing for the United States?** It means a lot. I've spent half of my life here. I've got a great family, great wife, my son, so it just made a lot of sense. I've been given the opportunity to be here and accomplish a lot.

**I have dual citizenship — Canadian and U.S. — and soon I'll have lived in America for longer than I was in Canada. But it's clear to me that, for whatever reason, I will never self-identify as American. Do you have similar feelings? Do you think of yourself as American?** Nah, I think of myself as from Cameroon. That's always going to be home. I was born there, and from what I've seen growing up — the struggle — I'll always identify with it. That's one of the reasons I ended up succeeding: because of the way I was raised, the environment I was raised in. Nothing was ever comfortable. I always felt like I got to work for everything. I started playing basketball at 16. [Embiid actually started playing

at 15 but first played in America at 16.] It's hard to make it when you start that old, especially because guys have been playing their whole life in America.

**A lot of people thought you were going to play for the French team. You ultimately decided to play for the American team. Can you tell me how you wound up making that decision?** It was tough. Obviously, I got my home country, Cameroon, which I love, and the U.S., where I've been for 14 years now, and then France, where I have a lot of family. I kind of felt rushed in that decision. I wanted to take as much time as possible, and it didn't help that France had put an ultimatum on when the decision had to be made.



Embiid during an exhibition game between the U.S. Olympic team and Canada in Las Vegas in July. Steve Marcus/Associated Press

**What was the timeline?** I didn't know. You know, I saw it on Twitter, and I was like, Whoa, where did this come from? Because from the conversation that I had with the U.S., it was: Take as much as time as you need. We'd love to have you, but it's OK if you make another decision. Then when you've got someone else putting the pressure on you, making it seem like, Oh, you got to make the decision, we need it, we need it — I'm like, well, I got one person over here telling me take as much time as you need. But one thing that was always known was that Cameroon is the first choice, and if they qualify I'm playing for my home country. I had the opportunity to talk to the French president about what was going on, and I told him one thing that was kind of bothering me a lot was the relationship between France and Cameroon and Africa's countries in general.

**Historically, you mean?** Yeah, and even right now. There's a lot of things going on over there. There's a lot of pushback as far as basically kicking out the French because it's been so many years of oppression. So that was my mind-set. I still got my family living in Cameroon, and I don't want to put them through any of that stuff. I want them to be safe, and the relationship between France and Cameroon or Africa in general is just not good.

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**You spoke to President Macron about this? Yeah.**

**No disrespect, but I would hope he has more important things to do than trying to convince basketball players to come play for the French team! But what did you say to him, and what did he say back?** It was a nice conversation. I got a call, and at first — I usually don't answer random numbers. I got a text, and I figured what was happening. We had a great talk.

**Are there ways in which having a son has changed how you think about your job?** He changed everything. We had him in 2020, and before that, I was not a serious human being. I was always joking around; I was always saying whatever. I was always acting crazy. That was the golden days of my Twitter era.

**You were famously a very good Twitter troll.** Yeah, basically. Then once I found out I was having a kid, I was like, I got to set a better example. I can't just be on Twitter trolling. That can't be my life. My focus on basketball changed. Not that I wasn't taking it seriously before, but I took it to another level.

**Explain to me why having a child made you take basketball more seriously. Because for some people, the thought process might be: I have a kid now. Maybe basketball's not the most important thing.** It was all about setting a good example. I think it came from my dad. Growing up, he was a handball player, and really good too. He was also in the army. I was always going to all his games and watching him competing and succeeding. That was like the bar for

me. I always told myself, I want to be better than him. I don't want to put that pressure on my son, but if that's the way he wants to look at life, then he has to be the greatest player ever. Which, to me, it's all about health. If I was healthy in all the seasons, that would be a different conversation.



Embiid playing for the University of Kansas in 2014. Orlin Wagner/Associated Press

**Is the implication that you think you would be in the greatest-player-of-all-time conversation without the injury problems? I think so. I think I'm that talented. Obviously you need to win championships, and to win championships you need other guys. You can't do it by yourself. I want to win so bad. But if you don't, you just got to understand that as long as you care about the right stuff, if it doesn't happen, maybe it wasn't meant to happen. So, yeah — I kind of forgot the question.**

**The question was whether you felt as if you were on a greatest-of-all-time trajectory. Yeah. If you think about it, the thing that stopped me all these years is just freak injuries. Every single playoffs, regular season, people falling on my knee or breaking my face — twice. It's always freak injuries at the wrong time.**

**Most of us can relate to wanting to achieve something and working hard at achieving something, and then through circumstances beyond our control — in your case injuries — not being able to. How have you learned to not get discouraged? Going back to how I was raised and where I came from: It's always about pushing, wanting to be better for yourself. There's only one injury that kind of put me — it was this past year, where mentally and physically it was tough. But every other one was always about, like, What am I supposed to do about it? It's life, you know? Then this past year — you play your best basketball of your career, and it's becoming so easy. Every single night. You're winning games and dropping 40, 50, 60. You finally got it figured**



out. You have an answer for everything that's presented to you on the floor. Double-, triple-teamed, you just know where to go. The system is in place, and everybody's doing their job, and you're on your way to accomplish a lot of good things, and then just like that someone falls on your knee. I don't have any explanation for why it was so tough, but it just was. Mentally depressing, physically your body not responding the way it should.

**You've been in Philly for about 10 years. I think you've had three coaches in that time, there's been front-office turnover, other star players have come and gone: James Harden, Jimmy Butler. Do you find yourself ever having questions about whether Philly is the place where you can win a championship?** I'm sure everybody asks themselves questions if you care about the right things and you care about winning and it hasn't happened. Which, I'm probably at fault, too.

**Why would you be at fault?** Injuries. I don't perform at the level that I should. I could take the easy way out and not play through injuries, but I'm just like, I'll play. So that's all my fault probably because I haven't performed at times at the level that I know I can and I know I should. But then again, if you want to win, the thing that I always talked about is stability, continuity. Actually, having three coaches, based on what I've seen, is not too bad. But it's still three coaches, three different systems. Then the players: Every single year is like, new co-star, new players. When you start looking at the teams that have won, whether it's Golden State,

Boston this year, Denver last year, those guys have been together for a long time and then just added a few other pieces that were able to take them over the top. You go through the years. The Jimmy [Butler] years: We had a pretty good team, and then we end up losing on a game-winning buzzer-beater against the eventual champion, Toronto.

**Kawhi Leonard's shot: The ball bounced around the rim and went through, and you guys lost.** The way I look at it is, like, you got so close, and instead of what can we do to make the team better but also having the same core — changed the whole team. No continuity.

**You mentioned Game 7 against Toronto in 2019. After that game, you were crying. For some people watching, that was an endearing moment. Probably some other people thought, We don't want to see athletes crying.** For the whole Twitter world, that was a fun moment. They enjoyed that.

**What were they saying on Twitter?** I don't know.

**Don't say you don't know.** To this day, I still see the video and the meme. They make fun of it. Some people, they just saw it as a way to make fun of you. But I care. It hurts losing.

**Was that game a turning point for your demeanor on the court? Leading up to that, you had a more playful attitude, embraced the showmanship aspect a bit more. Then after it seemed as if you**

**were more serious.** 2020 was probably my worst year in the N.B.A. I wasn't having fun. Going back to continuity: We got rid of Jimmy and JJ [Redick] and basically started over. I'm just like: Why? That doesn't make sense. The following year, we're just struggling. We're not as good as we should be. The whole year I'm just like, I don't want to play basketball. I didn't care. It was just depressing. I wasn't there. Before that I used to interact with the fans, always laughing. Then I became more serious. I think a lot of people in Philadelphia think I don't care about basketball because I'm not doing what they're used to — or I'm not having fun. Nah, I'm still having fun, but I'm just so focused. I don't have the energy to be interacting. I'm trying to do the job. I'm just different. I'm more serious. I'm more mature. So, yeah, it's a lot to think about. But I love Philly. I've been here for 10 years. It's looking like I'm going to be here for a long time and actually have the opportunity to finish my career here. If they'll let me.



Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

**What's the best cheesesteak in the city? I don't eat cheesesteaks.**

**You don't eat cheesesteaks?** No. You want to know the real answer? The best cheesesteak is Subway cheesesteak.

**Subway cheesesteak?! Everybody in Philadelphia who is dead is rolling over in their grave.** I don't eat cheesesteaks. I've tried twice. I'll have my chef make a cheesesteak.

**My understanding is that you have a disciplined personal life. You don't drink or do other stuff. Is it ever hard to fit into the culture of the league when you're playing with a guy like James Harden who's a famous partyer? Is there temptation?** No, there's never any temptation. I don't drink, I don't smoke. Never in my life. To me, that's actually disgusting. Like, I hate the smell. I can't stand it. I don't know how people in the world deal with it. I just can't do it. But there's never been any temptation. Probably because of the way I was raised.

**You lost your younger brother [in a car accident] when he was 13. You were 20. How did that experience affect your thinking about life?** It changed a lot. Losing someone that young and someone that's so close to you, especially because you're not — I wasn't around. I hadn't gone back to Cameroon since I got to the States, so I hadn't really seen him in a long time. So, yeah, it was tough going through it. For my family, my parents, my mom — all of us to this day. But especially for my mom, it still seems pretty recent and pretty tough.

**Did it change your priorities?** Yeah. I mean, family is very important. It made me not want to have three kids. It made me want to have four. Because there were three of us. I don't like that number three. I told my wife, better have four kids at least. Because two is too little and three is not — I don't like that. And then in life, just cherishing and including family more in everything.

**It's one of those things where it exposes the great lie of sports. We operate under this idea that professional sports is life and death.** It's not. Even when it comes to winning: Everybody always asks me, How would you feel if you won a championship? I'm like: If it happens, it would be great. But if I didn't, what do you want me to do? It wasn't meant to be. It won't be for the lack of trying. I work hard. And if it doesn't happen, what do you want me to do after I retire? Cry about it? No. Life is bigger than basketball.

*Embiid and I spoke again two days later.*

**You're a thoughtful guy, unassuming, and you have a gentle demeanor. But on the court, sometimes there's a boorish quality: drawing fouls and flopping or taking highly questionable fouls. It makes me wonder whether you feel as if you have to become a different person on the court from who you are normally.** No, I think it's still the same because everything that I do in life, I compete. I want to win in everything that I do.

**Do you let your kid beat you?** No. We play basketball sometimes, and he hates when I block him.

**You block a 3-year-old?** Got to learn while they're still young.



Embiid of the Philadelphia 76ers receiving the Michael Jordan Kia M.V.P. trophy before a game against the Boston Celtics in 2023. Jesse D. Garrabrant/NBAE, via Getty Images

**You talked about feeling more depressed this past season about being injured. Given your background growing up in a military family, as well as the pressures on athletes to not show vulnerability or admit weakness, did that make it hard for you to come to the realization that you were depressed?** I don't know what depression is. Yeah, I felt like I was depressed, but I'll never tell you that I was *actually* going through depression. How can I

say this? I believe in mental health, but I've never been one to admit I might be going through something like that. Like you said, the background, where I'm from, it's kind of hard to admit that something is going on.

**Do you feel like you can admit it now? No.**

**Given the tension between you and French basketball officials, what reaction do you expect from French fans in Paris? I expect a lot of boos. But I actually love it. It's not going to be anything I haven't seen.**

**I think every athlete in the history of sports interviews has said that either he doesn't care about boos or likes it when fans boo. But, really, in your heart of hearts, when 20,000 people are booing, it doesn't bother you? It just makes you want to go even harder so you can shut them up. There's nothing better: They're booing, and you make a big shot, and the whole arena is quiet. That's the best feeling. You look around, you're like, I don't hear anymore, it's time to go home.**

**You played with JJ Redick. What do you think about his taking the Lakers job with no prior coaching experience? If I was him, I don't know if that's a perfect situation. Maybe he thinks that's a perfect situation. But if you're coming in, especially with a job like the Lakers, it's kind of a make-or-break situation, because if you**



succeed, great, you're going to be coaching for years. But if you don't succeed, those coaches are usually bound to be fired within a year or two. I love him, I'm happy for him, but that's a tough job.

**Just to go back to the Olympics: Do you have any doubt about who's going to win the gold medal?** You look at the talent that the U.S. has, but there's equal talent on other teams. And the talent that's on the U.S. team, you also got to understand most of those guys are older. The LeBron now is not the LeBron that was a couple of years ago. So it's a big difference. Everybody would also tell you, and you can see for yourself, the athletic LeBron, dominant that he was a couple of years ago, is not the same that he is now. I think people get fooled by the names on paper. But those names have been built throughout their career, and now they're older. They're not what they used to be.

**Before we go, I just wanted to say: You know the sports-media hot-take machine is going to go into overdrive because you said that if it hadn't been for injuries you'd be in the greatest-of-all-time conversation.** That's OK because that's the truth. I mean, you think about what I've been able to accomplish and what has been taken away because of injuries. There's a lot of what-ifs, but if you combine collectively and individually, you can make the case of being up there.

**Also, in the context of your younger brother, you talked about understanding that life is bigger than basketball. Do you think there's any way in which that understanding inhibits your will to win? If you know that winning is *not* the most important thing, does that hold you back?** No. Because if it held me back, I would never play through injuries. I'd just be like, well, life is bigger than basketball. I understand that I live in the present, and the present means any chance that I get, go after it as far as winning. But also understanding that when I'm done, I should not have any regrets.

*This interview has been edited and condensed from two conversations. Listen to and follow "The Interview" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, Amazon Music or the New York Times Audio app.*

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