

I thoroughly enjoyed playing in the [Air Jordan 31](#), but my lasting impression of the shoe was that if Jordan Brand had only combined the upper of the 31 with the tooling of the 30, it would have been one of the best-performing models ever. So when Russell Westbrook started hitting the court in one-off hybrids with that exact setup, it was both reassuring and frustrating. It was nice to know that I wasn't alone in that preference, but it sucked knowing that I couldn't also have a pair.

I wondered all season what it would be like to play in the shoe, and as soon the news hit that a pair would be dropping at retail to commemorate his historic run, there was no doubt in my mind I had to have a pair. And even if it was more of a limited release and collectors item, I was going to play in it.

To say I had high expectations for the ["Why Not? 31s"](#) would be an understatement. I can't think of many shoes I've looked forward to playing in more. But can you simply take parts from two different shoes, slap them together, and have the best of both worlds?

Air Jordan 31 "Why Not?" – Fit

The upper of the Air Jordan 31 "Why Not?" remains basically unchanged from the standard model. That means that when you lace it up you'll experience the same satisfying cinching of materials, thanks to the "old school" decoupled tongue and upper construction. It makes the shoe easy to get on and off, in contrast to many of the sock-like [sneakers](#) we've seen as of late, and provides a much more dynamic fit. Where things differ slightly is simply a case of changed materials. The elephant print heel is thicker and more rigid than the synthetic leather on the "Banned" 31 that I previously played in. Where those had an already broken-in feel, the "Why Not" edition bordered on being too stiff for my first couple runs. That also means that it's even more supportive, so there's an upside as well. While the original didn't lack support, I came to prefer the updated edition's stability.

Air Jordan 31 "Why Not?" – Ankle Support

In the footwear world, visual technology is often introduced through huge marketing campaigns and claimed as innovation while some of the most meaningful advancements fly under the radar. The collar of the Air Jordan 31 is a perfect example of this. Rather than completely enveloping the heel in padding, six individual pods target

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the malleolus and ankle contours to provide stability. The result is the same - the heel is locked in place, resulting in outstanding support. But the quiet innovation is that this is achieved using less material and bulk, creating a sleeker and faster feel. Think of it as a better solution to a problem that was already solved. Adding to this already-great lockdown is the aforementioned support from the thicker heel material. The return to the AJ29/30 midsole takes things one step further as well thanks to the built-in forefoot counter and higher-wrapping heel.

Air Jordan 31 "Why Not?" - Cushioning

I applauded the Air Jordan 30 for using the same midsole as the 29 - it pains me to see something so effective go away for the sake of selling the next model as something new, rather than actually being better. That said, when the 31 went away from the design, I didn't necessarily fault it, because in some ways it could be perceived as an improvement. There was objectively "more" cushioning thanks to its giant forefoot and heel Zoom units. More didn't equal better for me though. The 29/30 tooling, with its relatively small, articulated Zoom unit and foam heel, offered a superior ride and playing experience. It has a far better court feel, making the shoe play faster and more responsive. And the Flightplate/Zoom combo works so well that it doesn't even seem like a meaningful compromise to cushioning because it still exists exactly where you need it the most. Until something dethrones it, this is the gold standard for cushioning in a basketball shoe.

Air Jordan 31 "Why Not?" - Traction

Not only does the move back to the tooling of the previous model mean better cushioning, we also get better traction. The original Air Jordan 31 outsole required frequent maintenance. It wasn't bad as long as the soles were kept clean, but a less-than-ideal amount of attention was needed. The 30 outsole (a 3D rendering of the Jordan quote: "Excellence is never second place"), however, could stop on a dime from day one and only needed the occasional swipe.

It's rare enough for a player exclusive to hit retail, but virtually unheard of for a PE with performance alterations to see a release. It's a shame that the 30/31 hybrid didn't drop that way from the start because while some changes had more impact than others, it's a superior version in almost every aspect, and was everything I'd hoped for. While I have my doubts that we'll see the tooling yet

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again on the Air Jordan 32, the fact that Jordan Brand went back to a proven platform at the behest of their highest profile athlete gives me hope that the next version could be even better. In the meantime, I'll keep hoping that more pairs of the Russell Westbrook 31 drop in easier-to-acquire releases.

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