

Wasted Envy

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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There were a lot of us (myself included) that were distraught over the Steelers winning this past Sunday's Super Bowl XLIII. In Gary's latest, he says that feeling envious of our dentally challenged rivals to the east is a waste of emotion. And that fans should instead look to their own Cleveland Cavaliers for salvation, a team that displays many of the same traits that have made the Steelers six time champions.



On the list of things that should disappoint Cleveland Browns' fans the most the morning after the Super Bowl, the fact that the groundhog saw his shadow should rank far higher than the Pittsburgh Steelers' win as any delay in the onset of spring in Cleveland is cause for far more fretting than another Super Bowl without the Browns. It's been XLIII years and counting without the Browns being on that national stage anyway. Any fan that hasn't long since adjusted to that probably never will.

But just as spring will arrive eventually, so too will the fans eventually come to grips with the now yearly ritual of realizing just how far these Browns are from basking in the glow of a title.

The world of professional sports, unlike what passes for youth sports these days, places a premium on results not effort. There is no balancing of the cosmos when it comes to the brutal realities of wins and losses. Most fans now realize that it's simply not true that every dog has its day. That's why you see more and more Steelers jerseys in and around town these days. You can't just lose a generation of fans out of operational ineptness and not think it won't have some effect.

But knowing that salvation isn't yet on the horizon and believing it might be are far

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different concepts. That's why some fans will spend days trying to understand what it means when the Steelers ended up with Ohio State's Santonio Holmes, who can actually make a catch that counts, while the Browns ended up with Michigan's Braylon Edwards, who can't. For that matter, they'll probably spend some time as well trying to understand how the Arizona Cardinals did manage to find in Steve Breaston a Michigan receiver who can catch while the Browns could not.

These are just a smattering of the anomalies that will drive the locals batty if they let them. Ultimately what gnaws is that everyone else seems to get an invitation to the party while Browns' fans are left to wonder why they aren't one of the cool kids.

Feeling envious of the fans of that Team to the East is a waste of emotion at this point unless it's because of what they stand for and not because of what they've accomplished. With six Super Bowl titles, the Steelers are the model franchise of the Super Bowl era. The Browns aren't the only team looking up to them at this point.

But for all the anger and envy coursing through the veins of Browns' fans right now, things aren't as bad as they seem. Consider the sad sacks in Detroit. It's bad enough that their NFL team just set a record for going 0-16. Now they find themselves looking up to Cleveland in basketball, too. That has to hurt.

The real lesson in Super Bowl Sunday for Browns' fans is not to look for glimmers of hope in the fact that the Arizona Cardinals, a 9-7 team, nearly pulled off a major upset, or even that the Steelers' vaunted defense had trouble stopping the pass even when it knew it was coming. Instead, it's to see the real hope that the Cavaliers gave to them earlier in the day.

The NBA season is about to reach its mythical halfway point and the Cavs, quite simply, are one of the few teams with a real chance to win the championship.

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That's a concept that is, frankly, hard to get one's mind around when you're mostly shell-shocked by the carnage of the football season.

Sunday's game against Detroit was instructive for all the reasons that a Browns' game generally is not. On a larger scale, it featured the refreshing change of a team that didn't get off to a hot start only to struggle to hang on at the end. The Cavs were in parts lethargic and uninspired early but yet managed to stay in reach of a once-great team hiding its rebuilding project behind the now slow-footed moves of a 33-year old point guard. With the arrival of the fourth quarter, the Cavs put on a display that was equal parts awesome and intimidating and in the process wrestled away control of the game like a suddenly aggravated dad finally confiscating the remote from one of the kids.

When Sunday's game ended, the Pistons looked whipped. Whatever other aspirations they may have on the season, they knew that they were now well south of where the Cavs sights are set. The Cavs success against the Pistons in playoffs past may have signaled a start to the changing of the guard, but until Sunday's victory, it was hard to tell if the Pistons were actually aware of that fact. Now they are.

That's the big picture. The smaller but just as important one is how the Cavs got there. Trailing by eight heading into the fourth quarter, LeBron James was on the bench resting up for what looked like the inevitable final push up the hill. As he re-grouped, the rest of the team took over and in the process sent a message that this team is both wide and deep. By the time James came back into the game with about 7:30 remaining in the game, the Cavs were now up by five. All that was left was for him was to give the edges of this cake one final swipe of frosting, which, of course, is exactly what he did.

The final blow came with 3:48 remaining and the Cavs up by only four, though the gap seemed larger. James found Zydrunas Ilgauskas in the left corner and Ilgauskas buried a 3-pointer. Allen Iverson then turned the ball over and James pulled up and buried another 3-pointer for the seven point lead. The Pistons

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never got any closer.

What was perhaps most fascinating was how meekly the Pistons did go down in defeat. There was 1:40 left in the game and the Cavs holding a 86-76 lead. Bigger deficits have been overcome in less time, just not this time. The Pistons hardly put forth any effort in that last nearly two minutes. When Mo Williams, for example, rebounded a missed Tayshaun Prince 3-point attempt, the Pistons didn't even attempt to foul him. They were far more content to just let the clock move as quickly as possible so they could move on to whatever else the day may have held for them.

As wins go, it may not be remembered as the season begins to wind down. But that doesn't mean it wasn't meaningful. The Cavs place in the Eastern Conference may already have been established well before tip-off, but in the hearts and minds of the beaten Pistons they now knew full well the new pecking order.

To the extent that one franchise can learn from another, Sunday's game was the perfect opportunity for the Browns to learn something from the Cavs. The Cavs have the swagger and ability that the Browns and their owner crave but can't find. It helps, certainly, when you have the best player in the league on your team, but James is the first to acknowledge that the team's success this year is, well, the result of the team.

It starts with owner Dan Gilbert, it flows to general manager Danny Ferry and finally on to head coach Mike Brown. Brown came in with a defense first mentality that he hasn't wavered from. Ferry has given Brown the freedom to drive that point home, even when it wasn't being as well received as it is this season, and has gone about acquiring players of a like mind to not just complement James offensively but also to play the game that Brown is trying to coach.

When a plan is put into practice and the results apparent, it seems so simple.

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Why, then, does it have to be so hard when it comes to the Browns?

Randy Lerner is right when he says that his head coach and his general manager need to be on the same page. If it helps for him to look at the New Englands and Pittsburghs of the world, ok, but the best example is right in his backyard. Rather than deep dive into the psyche of Bill Belichick any longer, Lerner should spend quality time with Gilbert, Ferry and Brown. My guess is that James could also teach him a thing or two as well.

Next year's Super Bowl Sunday doesn't look to be any more gratifying to Browns fans as any other. But if the Cavs keep winning, as they should, they'll continue to be the NBA's counterprogramming for that day, giving Cleveland fans at least some reason to feel pride even as they shed some tears.