



Since the summer of 2010, LeBron James has been dead to the Cavaliers.

Any and all references to LeBron's contributions to the franchise have been obliterated at Quicken Loans Arena. Other than the banners hanging in the rafters that commemorate the 2007 Eastern Conference title and the Central Division titles in 2009 and '10, any vestige of the LeBron Era has been erased by a very bitter organization, likely at the behest of Dan Gilbert, who still finds it hard to refer to LeBron by name.

While the Cavs were busy wallpapering over any evidence that LeBron once wore their team's uniform, LeBron has been creating a new legacy in Miami, where he has won two additional MVP awards, and now two NBA titles.

LeBron was a villain to the nation when he kicked Cleveland to the curb on national TV three years ago. But since then, he's regained his throne. He's back to reigning as one of the most popular – and now one of the most decorated – athletes on the planet.

Attitudes soften, particularly for the vast majority of people in towns that had no skin in the game. Now Cleveland, once a sympathetic character in LeBron's production, is becoming a lone pocket of LeBron-spite in a nation that is once again learning to love and celebrate LeBron.

LeBron is positioned to go down in American sports history as an icon. He's positioned to go down in local history as a scoundrel. And it's a crying shame, because Northeast Ohio is one of

the few places where LeBron's legacy should truly matter.

He's the best basketball player our region has ever produced by a wide margin. He was drafted by our local team. He led that team to its only Finals appearance to date, and its only two 60-win seasons. In 43 years of play, the Cavs franchise has won 12 playoff series. Eight of those series wins came on LeBron's watch.

No player has mattered more to the Cavs franchise, or to the Northeast Ohio region. But if the present prevailing attitudes stay anchored in place, we'll never acknowledge it. The best player in Cavs history, and one of the several greatest players to ever wear a Cleveland uniform in the approximately 140-year history of professional sports in this town, will stay frozen in time as a pariah. The Cavs will find themselves in the uniquely terrible position of being completely estranged from their greatest alumnus.

The question of how to repair that relationship is a dicey one, however.

From the outside looking in, it's easy to tell Clevelanders to suck it up and get over it. LeBron gave us seven years of his career, he gave us some great memories, and then moved on to the next phase of his career. He's won two titles in Miami, so no one can question whether it was the right move. As for "The Decision," broadcast on national TV? It was certainly self-aggrandizing and ill-advised, but it's not like LeBron shot puppies or clubbed baby seals in front of the nation. At some point, we're making too big a deal out of it.

It's true ... to a point. But for a fan base that wants nothing more than a single world championship parade down Euclid Avenue, the fact that a native son left, and did so in the fashion he did, then justified it by starting a dynasty in his new town, it's a bitter pill to swallow. LeBron is doing for Miami what we wanted him to do for us. Miami's dream-come-true was supposed to be ours. And we promise we would have stayed until the final buzzer.

LeBron gets rings, Miami gets parades, and we get a 50-year championship drought that doesn't appear to show signs of ending anytime soon.

So, to the rest of the country – it might be as simple as “get over it” in another city that hasn’t been pushed to this level of dysfunction by sports. Here, it’s another shot to the collective groin in a city that has received way too many over the years.

The high road is a hard road to take, and maybe a road that we’re not ready to take just yet.

The only way this situation might get completely rectified is for LeBron to return to the Cavs. For LeBron to give us another stretch of contending basketball while he still has some decent tread left on his tires – and then, when he takes off the Cavs uniform for good, he does so on amicable terms, whether he’s won us our long-sought championship or not.

It’s a mouthful to ask: LeBron returning with some prime years left, teaming up with Kyrie Irving, who is more than seven years his junior, and once again lifting the Cavs into the NBA’s stratosphere. But knowing that the Heat’s roster – particularly Dwyane Wade – figures to be in an ever-increasing state of age-related decline over the next several years, and the fact that the NBA’s new escalating luxury tax penalties are lining up to slam high-payroll teams like the Heat, the Cavs, with a young, low-cost and financially-maneuverable nucleus might be far from the worst option for LeBron, should he decide to test the free agency waters in 2014 or 2015.

Admittedly, there is some selfishness at work. I’m not too prideful to admit that I miss the buzz that surrounded the Cavs when LeBron was here. I miss deep playoff runs. I miss analyzing playoff matchups. As much as I want to believe Kyrie is capable of piloting the Cavs to that type of success himself, I know it would be a near-certainty if LeBron came back.

But taking it a level or two deeper, the relationship between LeBron, the Cavs and the region needs repaired. It’s too important of a relationship to have the events of the summer of 2010 stand as the final chapter. LeBron deserves to be revered in his home region, not reviled. And we deserve to have a superstar’s legacy worth celebrating.

But that’s not going to be his Miami legacy. It has to be our own.