



Where have we heard this before?

The Cavaliers' franchise player is cornered on the subject of his future by a press corps eager to stoke the flames of intrigue by further-moistening the already-sweaty palms of a fan base that knows "fate" as the filthiest of four-letter words.

The player does nothing to allay the anxiety of the fans. He plays it coy, sidestepping the question with ambiguous generalities, such as: "I'm only focused on right now. I'll worry about the future when it gets here."

LeBron James tap-danced like that for seven years as a Cav. He now plays for the Miami Heat. Kyrie Irving tried on his tap shoes this past Saturday when reporters questioned him on his

future plans at a basketball camp he was conducting in Independence.

Irving can sign a max extension next summer – five years and about \$80 million – and the Cavs will almost certainly offer it to him. The only reason “almost” is even worth discussing is due to any unforeseen catastrophic injuries that could threaten his career, life-altering criminal charges or an irreconcilable falling-out with Cavs management. The statistical equivalent of being flattened by the remnants of a satellite falling to Earth, but you at least have to put it on the table.

In other words, he’s getting the offer. Now, whether he’ll accept that offer?

“Right now I’m a Cavalier,” he told the assembled reporters. “This is where I am. All that future stuff, I’m not really worried about. I’m living in the moment right now and I’m just trying to get better with the teammates I have now and make the playoffs for Cleveland. That’s the only thing I can do right now is give it my all as it stands right now and that future stuff, I’m not really worried about it.”

When you read it, the Cleveland parts of your mind start to squirm. You see all the negative space around the words – everything that wasn’t said.

Has he been taking advice from LeBron? Is he planning to hook up with LeBron? Is he planning to hook up with LeBron in a place other than Cleveland? Is Kyrie going to be another burgeoning superstar who ditches Cleveland right as he’s rounding into championship form?

Nobody can give you a cure for that bellyache. If Irving wants out of Cleveland at some point, he’s going to get out, one way or another. That’s how the game is played. When it comes to stars and superstars in the NBA, they get what they want. GMs can be strong-armed, coaches can be fired, rules can be manipulated.

Star power is the fuel that drives the NBA. The owners don’t run the league. Their best players do.

However, despite all of that, and despite the fact that New York-based radio gabber Brandon Tierney tweeted a few weeks ago that Irving is not long for Cleveland (which, to be fair, was rebuked by Irving himself), there are some concrete reasons to not panic just yet.

First of all, the Cavs hold Irving's rights for three more years. That's important not just due to the competitive window that Irving could allow, it's also because it gives the Cavs a breathable window to make any decision that might be necessary.

If Irving were to turn down or table an extension offer next summer, or try to negotiate an early opt-out that would drastically shorten his commitment to the Cavs, the Cavs would have from the summer of 2014 to, at least in theory, the trade deadline in February 2016 to decide what to do. If they decided to trade him, they'd have ample time to shop around and find the best deal.

Yes, that approach could backfire if Irving keeps suffering nagging injuries, or is felled by the aforementioned career-threatening injury, but nowhere does it say that the only guarantees in life are death, taxes and NBA players staying healthy.

And that's if he were to turn down an extension next summer. While Cleveland sports has a well-documented history of setting negative precedents, it is unheard of to this point for an NBA player to decline an extension coming off his rookie deal. The whole reason the media questioned Kyrie about his future is because the Wizards' John Wall – one of Irving's contemporaries in rising crop of young NBA point guards -- recently inked a five-year extension.

Even LeBron extended with the Cavs once, in 2006. When a player is only three years into his career, he still has to wade through so many checkpoints to get to unrestricted free agency – his base contract, teams options, qualifying offers – that it's easier to take the money sitting right in front of him, even if the team isn't positioned to make a Finals run at the moment.

It is possible for Irving to be planning an exit strategy from Cleveland as we speak. It is possible that he's eyeing star-laden rosters and warmer climates, dreaming of rings and bling on South Beach, or Hollywood Boulevard. It's also possible that Irving is quite happy in Cleveland – right now – and has no overt intention of leaving unless circumstances force his hand. To that end,

there is a lot of pressure on Dion Waiters, Tristan Thompson, Anthony Bennett and Andrew Bynum to become the supporting cast LeBron never had here.

What we do know is seven years of LeBron made us, and the Cavs, smarter, more streetwise and a heck of a lot more clinical about the NBA, their superstars and their culture of entitlement. No more talk about family and loyalty. This is a business. Every party acts in its own best interest.

Dan Gilbert has said it, and Chris Grant has repeated it, in so many words: The Cavs are not going to let themselves be held hostage by one player again. If Irving turns down an extension or tries to negotiate an escape hatch after two or three years, he's obviously not committed to the Cavs over the long haul, and as such, is not a reliable franchise cornerstone.

No more waiting around to see if his loyalty increases. No more letting your best player coast all the way to free agency while you have your fingers and toes crossed, hoping that he re-signs. That's a recipe for disaster. That is the summer of 2010 all over again.

If Irving balks, Irving gets traded. That's the bottom line. And, yes, it sucks. Because all we want in this town are great players who are motivated to stick it out and try to win us our first title since the height of Beatlemania.

But that emotional response gets in the way of good business. It's better to punt away a good player for draft picks than to lose him for nothing. And when a Cleveland player turns down an extension, it's not because he wants more money. He wants more money from a team in a bigger city.

As soon as they discover an ocean of oil under Cleveland and we can start building zillion-dollar skyscrapers like a Great Lakes version of Dubai, that will change. Until then, we have our reality.

Of course, this is all pre-emptive. There is a season of basketball to be played between now and next summer, and for the first time in three-plus years, the Cavs look like they might be

worth watching, even for casual fans that tuned the team out as soon as LeBron skipped town.

Kyrie's words are actually quite wise: Enjoy now. Let tomorrow bring what it brings. Most likely, it will bring a five-year contract extension, negotiated with little drama. But if it doesn't, the Cavs have a backup plan.

That's more than we could have said for them during the last superstar's reign.