

## In Defense Of LeBron

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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With all this kvetching about LeBron James, one would think that he



With all this kvetching about LeBron James, one would think that he's averaging more turnovers than points these days. You can pretty much take your pick from the various sports web sites, chat boards or sports talk shows and you undoubtedly will stumble upon someone with an opinion on what's supposedly wrong with LeBron, as if the premise itself is even valid.

There are two answers, take your pick. Here's the first: nothing. Here's the second: it's that he's LeBron, a victim of his own unparalleled success.

Perhaps the most pertinent antecedent to the questions about LeBron James was the questions about another amazing superstar, Tiger Woods in 2004. As most might recall, Tiger Woods was in a horrific slump, at least to those who thought Woods should win every week. He had fired his swing coach Butch Harmon, got engaged to a Swedish nanny and suddenly he was 0-10 in the major championships as he entered the 2005 season. Just as with LeBron and perhaps even more so, virtually every sports commentator with a microphone or a keyboard had a theory about what was wrong with Woods, even if those commentators knew little about professional golf. This despite the fact that Woods had finished second in the World Golf Rankings in 2004 and was fourth on the money list with a mere \$5.3 million in earnings.

Nevertheless, they branded Woods a fool for tinkering with one of the sweetest swings ever. They questioned his sanity when he fired Harmon and hired Hank Haney, even if they couldn't tell Butch Harmon from Tommy Harmon or Hank Haney from Mr. Haney. They openly speculated that his off-course activities were interfering with his ability to prepare. And don't

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even get anyone started about the Swedish nanny and what that was probably doing to his stamina. Tiger, for his part, said little other than he was working on "some things," which only seemed to frustrate the peanut gallery even more.

Of course, the air went out of that story when Woods went on to win the Masters and the British Open in 2005 and then won the British again the next year as well as the PGA Championship. Suddenly he was a genius again and no one, positively no one, was talking about his swing coach or his marriage. In the end, Woods was never the problem. It was the self-proclaimed golfing experts and the casual golf fans whose outsized and unreal expectations had placed Woods on a pedestal that no one could ever reach.

That's pretty much the territory LeBron finds himself in these days. There is no disputing, for example, that his numbers are down virtually across the board. But it's not as if the current numbers are lousy. He's still one of the five best players in the league by virtually any measure you can think of. He's still number one on the CBS Sportsline [power rankings](#). But for his detractors, this is hardly good enough.

One of the most scathing criticisms recently came from ESPN columnist Bill Simmons who gave LeBron a thumb down after the All Star game and [said](#), suspiciously without attribution other than to some unknown "connected" NBA types:

*To LeBron James, who coasted through the Skills Challenge on All-Star Saturday and played the All-Star Game with the uplifting, charismatic intensity of a female porn star trying to break one of those "most male partners in one afternoon" records. Could we end up putting him in the "Too Much, Too Soon" Pantheon some day? Will he become the basketball version of Eddie Murphy, Britney Spears, Michael Jackson and every other celeb who became famous too quickly and eventually burned out?*

*Before he becomes a global icon, maybe LeBron should work a little harder on his game.*

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*Here's what I know. I had four conversations with connected NBA people over the weekend that centered around the same themes: LeBron isn't playing nearly as hard as he did last season; it looks like his only goal right now is to get his coach fired; he's regressing as a basketball player (especially his passing skills and his shot selection); he made a huge mistake firing his agent and turning his career over to his buddies back home (all of whom are in over their heads); he was a much bigger problem during the Olympics than anyone realized; he doesn't seem to be enjoying himself anymore; he has an overrated sense of his own worth and his own impact in the sports world (as witnessed by the ESPN interview last week when he answered the "What are your goals?" question with two words: "Global icon"); he's been protected by magazine fluff pieces and buddy-buddy TV interviews for far too long; he doesn't have the same relentless drive to keep dominating everyone like Wade and Kobe have; and basically, we're much closer to LeBron re-enacting the career arc of Martina Hingis, Eric Lindros and Junior Griffey than anyone realizes. This will evolve into THE dominant NBA story of the next two months. You watch.*

If you take out the direct references to LeBron and the NBA, it sounds exactly like every criticism of Woods in 2004, right down to a controversial firing of one of his entourage and the off-court activities. Perhaps the most outrageous prediction Simmons makes is to say that, with barely three years in the league, LeBron is on his way to becoming more hype than substance.

What Simmons and the rest of the LeBron detractors forget, conveniently, is that no one outside of Tiger Woods ever entered his or her own sport with more hype and expectations (although Michelle Wie is starting to approach that territory), including the aforementioned Hingis, Lindros and Griffey, Jr. Yet, both Woods and LeBron have easily outpaced that hype by simply performing at levels of sustained greatness from virtually the first day they stepped on their respective fields of play. But these days, apparently, even that isn't good enough.

This bashing of LeBron is fascinating stuff and speaks more to outlandish expectations than rationale discourse. At this point, LeBron's a veteran, but he's still a very young veteran, barely 22 years of age. Dwayne Wade, by comparison is 24. That may not seem like much, but look back on your own life. If you weren't much more mature at 24 than 22 then it's time to grow up, Peter Pan. And while many talk about Wade's continued ascension, keep that in context as well. Simply put, put Shaquille O'Neal on the Cavs and you could probably substitute Wade's name in Simmons' column.

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For another comparison, look at Carmelo Anthony, about seven months older than LeBron. Anthony is still incredibly immature for his age and while a huge offensive talent and an elite player in the league, Anthony played in his first All Star game just this year and it took a David Stern holding his nose and looking the other way to accomplish that. And it wasn't because Anthony didn't have the numbers. It was because his relative lack of maturity and discipline resulted in a meltdown and an ensuing 15-game suspension. This isn't to bash Anthony at the expense of LeBron. It's merely to present the complete picture. In the end, as yourself, would you trade LeBron even up for Carmelo? Didn't think so.

If you still aren't satisfied with these answers, consider another: his teammates and/or his coach. There are times, many times, when his teammates have the same outsized expectations of his talent. As a result, they spend too much time simply standing around on the offensive end waiting for LeBron to do something. That tends to keep the ball in LeBron's hands even when he'd rather pass to someone heading toward the basket. With the shot clock inevitably winding down, LeBron then settles for still another jumper while his teammates stand idly by.

But whether you place this on LeBron's teammates or his coach is your prerogative. They're both probably to blame in equal measure. The least culpable is LeBron himself. Since he was in high school, LeBron has been the kind of player who takes his craft very seriously. He revels in getting others involved. He knows he'll get his points so he often looks to pass first and shoot second. But either head coach Mike Brown and/or LeBron's teammates just can't seem to fathom how to utilize that kind of talent to its fullest and instead ask LeBron to do everything but sell slurpees at halftime. Talk about being in a can't win situation.

The Cavs may be the most consistently inconsistent team in the league, but it is ridiculous to lay that on LeBron's already overburdened back and shoulders. The truth is, the Cavs need better players and without them, even exceeding his own lofty accomplishments to date is not going to suddenly make the Cavs an odds-on favorite to win the NBA championship.