

WITNESS

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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You'd have to go back to Tiger Woods' chip shot on the 16th hole at Augusta in 2005 to find anything close to the perfect marriage of marketing and reality that occurred Thursday night at the Palace in Auburn Hills, Michigan. Those lucky enough to witness one of the great performances in NBA playoff history, whether in person or on television, will forever be able to point to James' career-defining performance as the singular reason to forever silence whatever critics might remain of James. Gary Benz chimes in on King James' performance.



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LeBron James, whose Nike slogan is "Witness"; made everyone do just that, particularly a tired and frustrated Detroit Pistons team, as he single-handedly gave the Cavaliers control of the Eastern Conference Finals with an adrenalin-pumping two-point double-overtime victory. Those lucky enough to witness one of the great performances in NBA playoff history, whether in person or on television, will forever be able to point to James' career-defining performance as the singular reason to forever silence whatever critics might remain of James.

The statistics, as they often can be, were head-shaking. James played nearly 51 minutes, meaning he sat for only about seven. He was 18-33 from the floor, which would be special if most of the shots were of the 7-10 foot variety. Instead, they were an amazing array of lay-ups, dunks, three-pointers and fade-away 20-footers, proving that James has every shot imaginable in his personal arsenal. He scored the team's last 25 points and 29 of their last 30, and it wasn't out of selfishness, either. The team had a total of 13 assists, seven of which were from James. It was simply that James was in the kind of zone that only the rarest of athletes can attain and his teammates and opponents knew it. James was double and triple-teamed repeatedly. Pistons head coach Flip Saunders said that they tried all manner of traps and defensive schemes to stop him, but nothing worked. Indeed, the Pistons had no chance.

We noted before and will say it again, even if the Cavaliers find themselves coming up short in this series, the Pistons know their run is about to end. While many see James and his performance in the last three games as nothing short of the international emergence of perhaps the best player in the NBA, what really is being witnessed is the sea-change of transition in the Eastern Conference. The Pistons are the aging giant trying to hang on to one last moment of glory before they are forced to reload their roster with enough youth to take on James and the Cavs for the next several years.

There have been any number of moments in this series that underscore that point. Pistons forward Rasheed Wallace provided his own private catalogue in game four alone, from throwing his headband in disgust and earning a fifth technical foul to the jersey toss in the tunnel to the visitors locker room after the game.

But for a real signature moment, look no further than Antonio McDyess' clothesline takedown of the Cavs Anderson Varejao at the end of the first quarter Thursday night. Varejao is a handful, to be sure, and has a tendency to infuriate the opposition in even the most insignificant of regular season games. But the McDyess flagrant foul, borne out of the frustration that comes when a series isn't going the way it should, in the end played more like pathetic attempt to intimidate the Cavs early and take them out of their game.

But where the Pistons were able to make that tactic work last year when Wallace took an elbow to Zydrunas Ilgauskas and drew blood, this year was different. No one, including James, seemed to come to Ilgauskas's defense at the moment of impact last year, but as soon as Varejao went down, James literally jumped him and into the face of McDyess. That action cost McDyess his evening, cost James a technical, and sent a message to Wallace and the others that this isn't last year, as if they didn't know that already.

For all the swagger and pomposity that can be the Pistons, they seem, frankly, toothless in this series. Though they have won two of the five games, they have not dominated the Cavs at any point. In fact, it's really been the opposite. The Pistons have had trouble finding any traction in any game that would take them on an insurmountable run. The Cavs, feeding mostly off James but displaying on a team level the kind of tenacity that makes Varejao such a pest to his opponents, have refused to be run off the court. Even during those miserable third quarters, excluding Thursday night, the Cavs have still managed to keep it close enough to put themselves in a position to win at the end of each game.

In some ways coincidental and in other ways ironic, it is nevertheless fitting that James' signature game came at the same time as all manner of controversy is swirling around Kobe Bryant and the Los Angeles Lakers. Bryant, who at various points has been the best player in the game, is frustrated and lonely and can't seem to figure out where he wants to be and what he wants to do next. James, on the other hand, looks like the model of consistency and decorum on the court and off while singularly ensuring for David Stern and the rest of the NBA that as long as the Cavs are in the playoffs, good ratings likely will follow.

And while there is always a larger context to everything, for the local fans this is nearly as good as it possibly can get. Right now, in LeBron James, Cleveland sports fans have in their midst the opportunity to watch and appreciate as one of their own one of the top two or three greatest basketball players in the world. Clevelanders have had their share of superstars in a variety of sports, but you'd have to go back to Jim Brown to find the last time any Cleveland team had one of the greatest players in the game. That isn't necessarily an indictment on the mediocre teams fielded by the various Cleveland teams in the ensuing years as much as it is an emphasis on the fact that the truly greats are in short supply.

If the James and the Cavs are not able to finish off this series, a smattering of critics will re-emerge, just as they did when James passed to a wide-open Donyell Marshall in game one of the series. If James and the Cavs advance to the Finals, those same critics will nit-pick if they can't get past San Antonio which, for all intents and purposes, are the New England Patriots of the NBA. That kind of scrutiny comes with the territory and is something James has faced since his sophomore year in high school. But a performance like Thursday night's can't be denied and while it may not lead to the ultimate prize right now, it leaves

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no doubt that James has the ability to bring this town the championship it so desperately craves if not sooner, then soon anyway.