

A Cavaliers Christmas Carol

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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After watching the Cavaliers lose their fifth straight game Wednesday night in an almost surreal fashion, you had to wonder whether this season is turning into Danny Ferry's worst nightmare. Then it occurred to me that maybe this wasn't so much a nightmare but rather an elaborate display put on by the Ghost of Seasons Future in which a LeBron-less Cavaliers team struggles to win 20 games.

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You can just see Ferry, lying in his bed, his legs sticking out from the other end, tossing and turning every night as if he had just eaten a plate of bad clams. Occasionally, he's able to drift off only to be visited by a series of apparitions.

First to stop by and pay a visit is The Ghost of Seasons Past. This Ghost has taken the form of a salary cap-constrained roster that effectively has prevented Ferry from making the kinds of deals that teams on the cusp like the Cavaliers need to make in order to actually grab that next NBA crown. The Ghost of

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Seasons Past takes Ferry on a journey, showing him how teams like Chicago, unconstrained by salaries and possessing enough players, get a chance to flirt with adding someone like Kobe Bryant (who is the star, by the way, of his own tragi-comedy nightmare playing now in the heads of Jerry Buss and Phil Jackson).

Then Ferry gets to watch, helplessly, while teams like Boston actually do get the opportunity to perform the kind of extreme makeover that can literally transform a franchise overnight, adding another team to the mix of Cavs competitors in the East. But before the Ghost of Seasons Past leaves his dreams, it does let him sign Cedric Simmons and Devin Brown as a final inside joke on how pervasive this Ghost can be when not properly respected.

Ferry then awakes from that dream, no doubt in a cold sweat and no closer to any answers whatsoever on how to pay proper homage to the Ghost of Seasons Past.

Realizing that simply losing sleep over mistakes he cannot undo, Ferry begins to drift off again. But no sooner has he rid his dreams of one Ghost than does another, the Ghost of Seasons Present, stop by for a chat. This particular Ghost takes the frightening form of Sasha Pavlovic and Anderson Varejao, or more specifically, the agents for these aforementioned restricted free agents.

As rough as the Ghost of Seasons Past played, at the moment he seems no match for the Ghost of Seasons Present. Ferry tried to appease the Ghost by making a tender offer to each, a gesture he thinks will show the two that the Cavs really do want them around. But this only angered the Ghost as did Ferry's subsequent long-term offers, and they accuse Ferry of being Scrooge-like with Dan Gilbert's money.

As the Ghost of Seasons Presents takes Ferry on another journey, it shows him that a team without Varejao and Pavolic is one that could easily lose by 18 at home to Dallas in the opening game of the season. This makes Ferry shutter. But applying one lesson that he did learn from the Ghost of Seasons Past, Ferry decided that if he succumbed to the outsized demands of his wayward free agents, the Ghost of Seasons Past would be back and with a vengeance. So he decided not to appease the Ghost of Seasons Present.

And as it turned out, this was the right move as the Ghost of Seasons Present wasn't nearly as resilient as its more evil stepbrother. When Ferry stayed the course, the Ghost of Seasons Present eventually dissolved, just not quickly or painlessly. Pavlovic did sign a relatively team-friendly contract and was back rather quickly. Varejao, on the other hand, remained in Brazil, angry and out of shape, taking pot shots at Ferry and his fellow teammates from afar..

But eventually even Varejao realized that he had completely overestimated his worth and was forced to sign a contract for less money than he was previously offered. In matching the offer sheet to Varejao from the Charlotte Bobcats, Ferry most assuredly made a value choice that it was better not to anger the Ghost of Seasons Past then simply appease the Ghost of Seasons Present. But with a contract that will leave the Cavs without Varejao in two years, was the respect paid too deep?

That's the question a suddenly sleepless again GM was left to ponder. But eventually Ferry came to realize that the world turns in unusual ways and two years in the NBA can be a lifetime. Oddly comforted by that uncertainty, Ferry again was able to drift back asleep, only to be visited by the Ghost of Seasons Future.

Every bit as scary as the others, maybe even more so, the Ghost of Seasons Future took the form of a LeBron-less Cavaliers team, showing Ferry in stark terms what he could expect if his one true superstar was either unwilling or unable to play for the hometown team. In this case, the Ghost of Seasons Future presented Ferry with a relatively minor injury that would keep James out of the lineup just long enough to allow Ferry to grab a real taste of what the future will hold. And it's been ugly.

Without James, and with the Ghost of Seasons Future throwing in a few other injuries for good measure in case Ferry missed the point, Ferry and the rest of us have learned that it's an incredibly fine line between playoff-bound and the lottery. In fact, in this case it's not even a fine line so much as a sprained index finger.

Talk about a small margin of error.

But lest the Ghost of Seasons Future feel as if its point has been missed, the Ghost has forced Ferry and the fans to endure some of the worst basketball this team has played in the LeBron era. The defensive effort has been mostly perfunctory. The shot selection has rivaled that of the losing team in a 6th grade CYO game. And the gap between success and failure seems to grow by the dribble.

Eventually, though, the Ghost of Seasons Future will disappear into the ether as well, at least for awhile. James' finger will heal, Varejao will lose enough weight to fit into his uniform, Larry Hughes will return and the Cavs will go back to playing just good enough to make the playoffs but not good enough to do any real damage. In other words, reality will set in. But at least for awhile, the nightmare for Ferry will end. The questions will remain, however, not the least of which is whether Ferry will have learned the lessons visited upon him in the night by the three evil Ghosts.

Surveying the landscape, it seems first and foremost that Ferry has indeed learned the lessons of the Ghost of Seasons Past. For example, the signings he made in the off-season were essentially meaningless other than as stop-gap measures. While the impact of these players will likely be minimal on the floor, more importantly they won't have any real impact on the Cavs rather challenging salary structure.

Ferry also learned, with the help of the Ghost of Seasons Present, that signing either Pavolic or Varejao to above-market deals would only exacerbate the problems that the current salary structure present in

terms of making wholesale improvements in this team down the road. In the case of Varejao, in particular, Ferry held firm to his concept and not only won the respect of his fellow general managers and the begrudging respect of the agents who now know that Ferry can't be pushed around, he also sent a powerful message to the team that the only true path to success is careful planning and building.

But before Ferry starts putting together his version of Mark Shapiro's five-year plan, he best remember what the Ghost of Seasons Future was there to show him. Asking LeBron to remain patient for too long, like Minnesota did with Kevin Garnett, would be a fool's gamble. For Ferry and all Cavs fans, a LeBron-less team is the mother of all nightmares that can be a reality just three seasons from now. That means, of course, that Ferry can't be content to slowly build to a crescendo several seasons down the road. Instead, he needs to find a way to balance the temptation to make a short-term splash with potentially bad long-term consequences against the need to demonstrate to James that there is no reason to look elsewhere after the 2010-2011 season. And for good measure, he better show the fans he and Gilbert are asking to fund this enterprise that there is a plan in place that will work.

If Ferry can do all that and do it well, if Ferry can learn the lessons of his nightmares, then the Cavs have a legitimate chance to grab a title or two. And if that happens, Ferry can stand arm and arm with Gilbert and the fans as they survey all that has accomplished and shout "God Bless Us Everyone."