

## Elephants In The Room

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, March 26 2008 7:00 PM -

---

These Cavaliers have gone through a lot of changes this season. Holdouts from Andy and Sasha. A whole host of injuries. And an extreme makeover of the team at the trade deadline. Yet that has not stopped the fan criticism of coach Mike Brown's offense every time the Cavs lose a close game. In his latest, Gary takes a look at the Cavs as they head into the final ten games of the regular season, trying not to get stomped by the elephants in the room in the process.



As hard as it is to believe, the lack of any meaningful championships in a couple of generations has done nothing to keep Cleveland sports fans humble.

Listening to WKNR's Greg Brinda and one of his callers dissect the Cleveland Cavaliers the other day reminded me that when it comes to fans, perspective is the first casualty. Apparently common sense is the second. Without trying to recall every painful detail of that inane call, the one point that stuck with me was the caller's observation that the Cavs half-court offense is "terrible";

Recognizing that reasonable people can reach different conclusions, it's still hard to imagine how any aspect of the Cavs could be considered objectively terrible so long as the team has the services of LeBron James. Certain parts of his game may be better than others, but nothing about anything he does would ever be considered terrible. Thus, when he's on the floor, which he is about 80% of the time, the Cavs will never be a terrible team.

The caller's point, I suppose, was that Cavs head coach Mike Brown isn't the most creative coach when it comes to offense and that this is what's keeping the team from achieving at a higher level. Maybe. But whatever limitations Brown may have generally in coaching the offensive side of basketball hasn't prevented James from either leading the league in scoring this season or from dominating games in the fourth quarter. In other words, it's not as if Brown's offensive schemes are choking off James' creative instincts.

The larger issue is really one of perspective and common sense. Apparently that caller and a whole host of other fans believe that the Cavs should never lose a game and when they do, it must be Brown's fault. Of course, those fans would never state it that bluntly though that's clearly the standard. But the number one rule in analytics that most tend to forget: don't ignore the obvious. And when it comes to the Cavs, there is a whole lot of obvious to get through long before one gets to the relative merits of Brown's half-court offense. It's that kind of analysis that makes me appreciate why there are gun laws on the books in the first place.

As great as James may be, he's not a machine. Even though the Cavs tend to lose when he's not in uniform, the opposite simply isn't true. His talent, his focus, his sheer ability may be well above most any other player in the league, but he still plays a team game. There are roles to be played by the other four on the court with James and their skills and abilities do much to inform his success. And as we now know with Larry Hughes, for example, players don't always willingly accept those roles. In any case, James may have great influence on the actions of his teammates, but he ultimately doesn't control them. Every time one of them makes a knucklehead move, it has an impact, and that's assuming that James himself never does anything wrong, which itself is far from a safe assumption.

Of course, there are also five other players on the floor at the same time, all with opposing jerseys and all with the goal of blunting whatever it is that James and the Cavs are trying to do at any point in time. Many times, in fact too many times for most fans, they are successful. Sometimes you just have to tip your hat to the worthy opponent. The Cavs don't always lose. Sometimes the other team does win.

But moving beyond the simple team dynamics at play, consider two other overriding considerations. First, the Cavs have had a fair share of injuries throughout the season. Second, Cavs GM Danny Ferry performed a mid-season extreme makeover of the roster that had no chance of gelling quickly under the best of circumstances.

There is no great need to recount all of the specifics of each injury the Cavs have had to endure this season, but it is important to note that James, Zydrunas Ilgauskas, Sasha Pavlovic, Daniel Gibson, and Anderson Varejao all have missed substantial playing time this season. That's pretty much the group that carried this team into the NBA Finals last season. Devalue that accomplishment all you want, but those injuries are going to have an impact.

As for the roster turnover, even the most cynical fan would admit that it's been dramatic. Yet, since that time, the Cavs have had precious few opportunities to actually spend time on the practice court integrating the new pieces with the old parts. If you need proof, just watch another Delonte West pass go astray. It's not as easy as it sounds to put all of that together on the fly, except to someone who's knowledge of the game comes from the five or 10 minutes of the game he catches every now and then on cable.

Ferry knew that the biggest gamble he took at the trade deadline had to do with the ability of Brown to pull it all together in time for the playoffs given the Cavs schedule and the limited practice time available. That was under the best of circumstances. Combine that daunting task with the injuries and you begin to understand exactly why the Cavs have only played well in spots since the trades.

The thinking goes that as long as James is on the floor, the Cavs have a chance to win. That's true, but the operative word in that sentence is "chance"; and not "win." There will always be things that even the best simply can't overcome.

## Elephants In The Room

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, March 26 2008 7:00 PM -

---

What fans really worry about I suspect is James' tipping point. The focus on Brown is really a focus on James in the sense that the common perception is that the Cavs won't be unable to retain an unhappy James when his contract comes due in a few years. But in fans zeal to define the standard they assume is in place, they again ignore the obvious.

James, like most players not named Larry Hughes, really do want to win a championship. There is always another dollar to earn somewhere, but what really motivates is winning. Players want to compete at the highest levels and they want to feel like the franchise they're playing for shares that commitment. That goes well beyond the transient offensive schemes of the incumbent coach and something someone like James certainly understands. What James does see is that the Cavs compare favorably with anyone in the league. Owner Dan Gilbert has done his part to fund the enterprise in a way Indians fans dream about. He's spent greatly on infrastructure and has given the Ferry the freedom to do likewise on personnel. He's more than demonstrated to even the most discerning players a commitment to winning a championship.

If James' future is going to be dictated by whether or not the Cavs are committed to getting a championship, and in part it will, then fans have little worry, despite what they might think about Brown's half court offense. But having a commitment to winning and actually winning isn't always the same thing. No one doubts Mark Cuban's commitment in Dallas but his team keeps falling short for reasons outside of their control. That's going to happen just like it happened to the Cavs in the Brad Daugherty/Larry Nance/Mark Price/Hot Rod Williams years. There are always other factors at play, like Michael Jordan, for example.

The Cavs are at an interesting juncture but hardly a crossroads. There is every chance that they'll fall short of last year's accomplishments yet still find themselves in a better position to compete down the road. But the only way to really know is once some of the more obvious issues get taken care of, like injuries and practice time. Those sorts of things take time and we do live in an age of instant gratification so for those fans looking for answers to the wrong questions, continue to drive yourselves crazy. Just make sure that in the process you don't get stomped by the elephants in the room.