

King James Wise Beyond His Years

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Tuesday, April 29 2008 7:00 PM -

Playoff fever has once again gripped C-Town, and the Cavaliers appear primed to oust the Washington Wizards from the NBA's second season for the third straight year. With all the blustering and boasting that's taken place both on and off the court (mostly off, in the Wizards' case), one can't help but feel a sense of pride for how the Cavaliers, and more specifically LeBron James, have handled themselves.



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James' maturity obviously isn't limited to this series alone. Over the last five seasons, Cavs fans have enjoyed watching James grow up before their eyes. It's rare, but sometimes fans are given the privilege of watching a player (or group of players) who is such an exceptional talent that as a fan, one can't help but get a little spoiled. When considering contemporary Cleveland sports, the defensive exploits of Omar Vizquel and Roberto Alomar come to mind. Baseball may never see a better middle infield; Robbie and Omar made double plays into works of art, and made impossible plays look routine, but I digress.

With LeBron James, his excellence includes almost every facet of the game of basketball. Even James isn't perfect, mind you. I suppose his outside shooting could be more consistent, his free throw percentage certainly should be better, but complaining about those components of LeBron's game is like whining that Jennifer Aniston arms are a little too hairy. (Are they? I have no idea.)

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Ridiculous statistics, awards, playoff achievements; let's put all of that aside and briefly consider LeBron, himself. There's no doubt that James' skills granted him fame and fortune that only a handful of individuals ever achieve, and all at a very tender age.

Money, success, and being generally well-liked by the media are positive things, but they can be curses if not handled correctly. We've recently seen far too many examples of young athletes who were handed the world but for one reason or another, imploded. Pacman Jones has had multiple run-ins with the law and still awaits NFL reinstatement, a \$130 million contract couldn't curb Michael Vick's appetite for dog fighting, Maurice Clarett's fall almost resembles a Shakespearean tragedy, and it seems like half of the Cincinnati Bengals' roster has been arrested over the last few seasons.

What's the worst someone can say about James -- that he got a 101 MPH [speeding ticket](#)

? Are people still all that riled up about the

[Yankees cap fiasco](#)

? Perhaps some are irked by James having fathered two children out of wedlock, but he's been with the same girl since high school. Frankly, James probably just doesn't want to fret about ever losing half of what's his, and while that might not be too popular with traditionalist fans, it's certainly smart. While fans might not be thrilled by everything James does off the court, it's a free a free country. The fact remains that James has been by all accounts a law abiding and upstanding citizen. LeBron has realized that if he simply keeps himself out of trouble and plays basketball, he's got it made in the shade, and that's exactly what he's done during his five-year NBA career.

But returning to the playoffs and my original point, two years ago we saw James learn how to win in the playoffs, last year he literally carried a very mediocre roster to the brink (well, within four games, anyway) of an NBA title, and although these playoffs are still young, James is making strides once again. This time around, LeBron has been tested not just by a battle on the court, but by a war of words initiated by Washington's DeShawn Stevenson.

It all began after the Cavaliers' March 13th loss to the Wizards, when DeShawn Stevenson made his now infamous "overrated" comment about James. LeBron responded with the Jay-Z/Soulja Boy comparison, and the rest is history. Stevenson claims that James did something to prompt the

"overrated" remark, but has never revealed that juicy nugget. Since Stevenson is by all accounts the NBA's version of [Crazy Joe Davola](#), it's likely that LeBron sneezed too loud, or made an off-color remark about Stevenson's pet goldfish.

Gilbert Arenas, another eccentric (the Wizards seem to collect them), upped the ante when he stated on his blog, "We want Cleveland," prior to the start of the playoffs. Things have escalated even further with numerous Wizards player committing hard fouls on LeBron James, including a pair of flagrant fouls (Brendan Haywood in game two, DeShawn Stevenson in game four). The Wizards seem determined to break LeBron both mentally and physically, but there's been a wrench in the Wizards' plan: James has been undeterred.

While the Wizards have concentrated on false bravado and thuggery, James and his Cavaliers have been playing basketball, and James has managed to keep himself safely above the fray. Stevenson's clear swing at James' melon might provide the best example of James' superior focus. LeBron was clearly steamed by the foul, as he quickly walked in Stevenson's direction, but when faced with the possibility of a scrum James was very cognizant of the fact that his presence was much more important to the Cavaliers than Stevenson's was to the Wizards. Shortly after the incident LeBron gave a halftime interview, during which he didn't deride Stevenson for what was a blatant cheap shot, but simply acknowledged that hard fouls are part of life in the playoffs.

James has shown throughout the series that he's determined to keep the Wizards' shady tactics from getting into his head. After all, if LeBron projected the image of a player easily bothered by derogatory comments and cheap fouls, he would do nothing but make himself a marked man for future playoff series. LeBron's focus, as it has always been, is on basketball, and doing whatever it takes to help the Cavaliers win.

In a way, James' intense focus has caused the Wizards' own strategy to backfire. At certain junctures in the series, Washington, not Cleveland, has allowed their emotions to get the best of them, and it's caused mental lapses and silly fouls. The Wizards know that they haven't been able to get LeBron's goat, and it's frustrating the hell out of them. And that's not even mentioning that when the Wizards incite King James' wrath with a hard or cheap foul, he frequently responds by charging to the hoop with a renewed vigor.

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An interesting subplot was added to the series' upcoming game five when Brian Windhorst of the Akron Beacon Journal [suggested](#) that if this game gets out of hand (i.e. blowout Cavs win), DeShawn Stevenson might be enough of a wacko to attempt to injure LeBron. If things broke down and a rumble commenced, you can bet I'm putting my money on James to clean Stevenson's clock 12 times out of 10, but once again, LeBron has more on his mind than mixing it up with some goofball.

Any suspension for LeBron James would cripple the Cavaliers' chances in the next round of the playoffs, and you can bet that James knows this as well as anybody. If such a conflict does occur, it may be James' biggest test of self-discipline on the court that we've ever seen. But given what we've learned about LeBron during his time in Cleveland and during this series in particular, you can probably expect number 23 to do what he's always done: rise above and play ball.