

Never let it be said that professional sports has no bearing on real life. LeBron James, through persistent tormenting of the Washington Wizards and their fans, scored you a nearly-free Thursday dinner. LeBron's response to the Papa John's crybaby t-shirts? 27, 13, and 13 in leading the Cavs to a rout over the Wizards in their own crib to finish them off in game six. Now, coming off a 2-18, 10 turnover performance ... can the King respond again?



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Last week, some D.C.-area Papa John's pizza restaurants mocked LeBron by sponsoring the now-infamous &quot;Crybaby 23&quot; t-shirts that popped up in the Verizon Center stands during last week's Game 6. Thursday, Cavs fans in the Cleveland area get to reap the tasty reward -- if you like Papa John's pizza, that is. In an attempt to counteract the bad publicity brought on by their misguided D.C.-area colleagues, more than 40 Papa John's locations across northern Ohio will be [selling 23-cent, one-topping pizzas](#) from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

LeBron, simply by being LeBron and doing what he does best -- winning, dominating, causing fans of opposing teams to look for some flaw to exploit -- made this day of pizza pleasure possible. But it's hard to believe that LeBron, finely-tuned athlete that he is, would partake in the pizza orgy even if he wasn't in Boston preparing for Game 2 of the Celtics series.

It has little to do with counting calories or cholesterol points. For LeBron, it has

much more to do with motivation being its own reward.

Every time LeBron has faltered, every time he has failed to deliver the points, rebounds and assists that his team relies on for wins, every time he hasn't stuck the game-winning shot where it counts, every time an opposing player mauls him while the refs swallow their whistles and look skyward, it's fuel on LeBron's fire. The next game, you should expect his best, because that's exactly what he expects from himself.

Heading into Game 6 of the first round, LeBron was coming off a narrow Game 5 loss in which he had a chance to win it just before the buzzer. Whether a non-called foul was to blame or not, LeBron was left pleading with the refs while the Wizards celebrated the fact that they lived to fight another day.

LeBron knew the chance he and his team had just missed. No one needed to break it down for him. A lesser player might have been sent reeling by the missed chance. LeBron took it all in, the humiliation of Game 5, the "crybaby" t-shirts, the catcalls from the stands, the physical beating administered by the likes of DeShawn Stevenson and Brendan Haywood, and like any great artist, used it to create brilliance in his medium.

His final line from Game 6: 27 points, 13 rebounds and 13 assists. His third career playoff triple-double. A 105-88 drubbing that sent the Wizards home for the summer yet again.

LeBron and the Cavs were riding high heading into Game 1 against the heavily-favored Celtics, a team that was looking suddenly vulnerable after letting the sub-.500 Hawks stretch them to seven games in the first round.

Game 1 was a close encounter. The Cavs lost by four and actually held a lead late in the fourth quarter after trailing for most of the game. But for LeBron, it was another flawed performance. By his standards, it was a dud.

LeBron scored 12 points during a downright Hughesian 2-for-18 shooting performance. He was tagged with four personal fouls that hindered his ability to drive aggressively in the second half. Even though Cleveland's defense did their part in holding Ray Allen scoreless and holding Paul Pierce to four points, the Cavs simply aren't going to win many games -- if any -- when LeBron scores 12 points, and he knows it.

Following the game, LeBron praised Boston's defensive effort, particularly their help defense, which allowed the Celtics' perimeter defenders to play tighter on LeBron than most teams can afford to. But he stopped short of pinning the entirety of his frustrating evening on the Celtics' D.

"I missed a lot of shots I know I can make," LeBron told reporters.  
"I missed layups. Those layups I've made my whole life."

Once again, with the doubters stroking their chins, waiting to see if The King has finally met a dragon he can't slay, LeBron will be forced to prove himself in Game 2 on Thursday night. Chances are, as those of us in Cleveland are hoarding our 23-cent pizzas, LeBron will be somewhere in the TD Banknorth Garden, drawing from the internal well of motivation that only those conditioned for greatness seem to possess, readying himself to once again rebound with a reputation-restoring vengeance.

"Sure," you might say. "But taking out the Wizards and their mouthy fans is one thing. These are the Boston Celtics. The Green Menace. Three of the best players in the game. Sixteen titles. The leprechaun in the rafters. Stopping them is a whole other ballgame."

To which I say, if LeBron isn't afraid, I'm not afraid. If watching LeBron over the past five years should have taught us anything, it's never to underestimate him, or his ability to make a better-than-last-year-but-still-not-all-that-impressive roster rise to the occasion.

Today, 23-cent pizzas. A month from now, maybe 23-cent drinks on Bourbon Street during a Cavs-Hornets NBA Finals.

Sure, it's a mid-spring night's dream. But with a motivated LeBron, just about anything on the basketball court is possible. Doubt him, and you might have to find that out the hard way.