

## Big Z: Determination Rewarded

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Monday, April 13 2009 7:00 PM -

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Sure, LeBron James is the favorite to win the NBA's Most Valuable Player award. Sure, Mo Williams would be a shoe-in for Most Valuable Addition (if there was such an award). And Andy "Wild Thing" Varejao might be in the running for Sixth Man of the Year, if he hadn't been called upon to start lately. Yet it is Zydrunas Ilgauskas, "Big Z," who is the very heart and soul of the Cavaliers. Jerry writes about the big man in his latest column for us.



Zydrunas Ilgauskas, despite being 7-foot-3 and tipping the scales at 260 pounds, does not play basketball like a wild Yosemite Sam bursting into a bar, both guns blazing. He's more like Marshal Will Kane in "High Noon" -- the quiet guy with the heart of gold who's willing to take on the tough jobs that nobody else wants.

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Yet it is Ilgauskas, "Big Z," who is the very heart and soul of the Cavaliers. Overcoming health problems and the gut-wrenching loss of stillborn twins two years ago, he has become the longest-tenured Cavalier, by far -- and maybe the most beloved.

"I'd rather be a complementary player to LeBron ... than to shoot 30 times and lose 60 games," the soft-spoken Z has said. "I don't have a big ego. At this point in my career, I would like to win something -- and win something in this city."

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His first notable experience on the hardwood was with Atletas, the club team in his hometown of Kaunas, Lithuania, where his father drove a truck and his mother worked as an engineer. He was the 20th overall pick in the 1996 draft (the same draft that gave the Cavs the long-forgotten Vitaly Potapenko

). But Ilgauskas had a long wait before beginning his NBA career. It took five surgeries and two-and-a-half seasons of rehabilitation before he became a vital part of what was then a bad Cavalier team. And unless he's had them removed recently, Z still plays with seven screws in his left foot and three in his right.

Those early health problems helped fashion the player he is today: a big, lumbering center who's a decent rebounder and who can score as well as the best centers in the league when he gets hot.

Z's arsenal of shots includes a turnaround baseline jumper; a big old sweeping hook from the middle of the key that takes him forever to release; those wonderful, wild, sometimes wacky tip-ins; and a number of easy lay-ins after twisting and turning the opposing center into a pretzel with some surprisingly nifty footwork. Besides being one of the team's most dependable free-throw shooters, Z can pound the boards, set picks, and -- this year especially -- hit shots from up to 23 feet that can't really be termed "jumpers," because his feet never leave good old terra firma.

Thus, the guy who few believed would ever become an effective NBA player has enjoyed a remarkably productive career, thanks to a series of gritty, determined rehabilitation programs and a true love for the game.

"It's always in the back of my mind what I went through," he told *Sports Illustrated* two years ago. "I look at my feet every day and that's the reminder of all of the scars that I had to go through and all the battles. I enjoy basketball so much more now because I don't take it for granted."

This year, with his career obviously winding down, he's averaging 12.9 ppg and 7.5 rpg -- strikingly similar to his rookie season when he averaged 14 and 9. Last month, Big Z scored his 10,000th point as a Cavalier (the 4th Cav to reach that milestone) and became the team's all-time leader in blocked shots with his 1,201st.

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"I still think this team is best with me on the floor, whether it's helping on defense and blocking shots or getting offensive rebounds and scoring," Z claimed not long ago. "I still can help this team."

Most of the time, he projects a heart bigger than all outdoors -- which has ingratiated him with the organization and fans alike. For instance, on the evening that he scored his 10,000th point, a young boy ended up with the game ball. Z let him keep it, telling the press that the milestone was "more about the journey and not the ball." Z also donates signed shoes, basketballs and other memorabilia to good causes and often visits (with teammates) sick children at Cleveland Clinic.

The only time he might be compared to the aforementioned Yosemite Sam is when he rushes to protect his teammates from sometimes brutal hits by opponents. They love him not only for that, but also for his willingness to play a subservient (albeit important) role in their success. Remember when the Cavs clinched their first NBA Finals trip in 2007? Whose arms did LeBron run into?

Old No. 11 is one of only three players to appear in 700 games for the Cavs.

"To see him overcome all that and be in the position he's in," coach Mike Brown said recently, "is very exciting. It couldn't happen to a better person."

Zydrunas Ilgauskas doesn't get all the attention and publicity of his more athletic teammates. But make no mistake, hands down, Big Z is the heart and soul of this year's Central Division champions.