

One For The Books

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The worst kept secret about Cleveland sports fans is that they trudge through daily life with an inferiority complex weighting them down like a 60-pound stone. Their existence in large measure plays out like a Springsteen song where they play out the part of the dreamers caught up in the grind of their daily circumstances. But every so often, they get to the place where they really wanted to go and they walk in the sun. Saturday was just that day. Gary writes about it in his latest piece for us.



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If you think it doesn't get better than watching the Cavaliers drub the Detroit Pistons in Game 1 of the first round of the NBA Finals while the Indians simultaneously are taking apart the Yankees like a golden retriever taking apart a throw pillow, it actually does. Try watching both games in front of TV screens side to side, each the size of a billboard, while in New York City. A more confused lot of New York fans would have been harder to find.

I was in New York this past weekend with my oldest daughter helping her get situated for an internship she has this summer in the city. After a day of walking around the Calcutta that is Battery Park and then heading to Columbus Circle and

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then toward Times Square for all manner of shopping for the next several hours, we finally found ourselves perched on two bar stools on the second floor of the ESPN Zone on Times Square.

Staring us in the face was the aforementioned TV screens and a couple hundred or so New Yorkers (and tourists of other stripes, I suppose). The setting was perfect. It was now late in the second quarter, the Cavs were up by plenty and the Indians were just getting warmed up in the second inning.

It was around this time that Shin-Soo Choo hit what turned out to be a relatively harmless 3-run homer to give the Indians a 3-2 lead, erasing the memory of another struggle by Indians' starter Fausto Carmona. (Here's an aside: I was heading home yesterday via the traveling '70s vintage Winnebago that makes up AirTran's "fleet" of planes when I heard two women conversing about the Indians' game on Saturday. For some reason, one woman kept on insisting that Carmona hit a grand slam in the game and the other, oddly, completely agreed. Now I did have a couple of Bud Lights during the game but certainly not enough to ever confuse Carmona with, say, Asdrubal Cabrera. The former is the one that throws the 55 foot breaking balls, the latter is the one that swings at them too often. I thought of correcting them but then I thought it was better to just leave some urban legends alone.)

Back to Choo. It was just after he hit that homer that LeBron James sank a nearly half-court shot just as the buzzer sounded at halftime. The Cavs had just let the Pistons close to within 9 points with 2.2 seconds left in the half. Inexplicably, Tayshaun Prince more or less let James get the inbound pass and dribble quickly to the half-court line while he half-heartedly gave James a slight shove with his elbow. Of course we know that James sank the shot, but all I kept thinking was "doesn't Prince watch '60 Minutes?" James sank one of those shots underhanded, on camera, first take. The only disappointing aspect about the James basket was the fact that Prince did foul him and it should have been a 4-point play.

It was at that point that the New York fans were fixated on the Cavs game. Meanwhile, the Indians kept hitting the ball as if it was being pitched by Ed from Brunswick. I was pretty sure that even I could get around on one of Chien-Ming Wang's fastballs and take it out over that short porch in right field. (Here's another aside: Every time there's a technological advance in golf, they lengthen the holes and shave the areas around the greens and grow the rough. It's why even the best players struggle to get to par during the U.S. Open. Why doesn't baseball follow suit? The dimensions of today's ballparks, starting with that goofy short porch in new Yankee stadium, would have trouble containing Duane Kuiper. Today's players are bigger and stronger than their counterparts of even 20 years ago [insert obligatory steroid joke here]. They throw harder and hit the ball further than ever before [insert second obligatory steroids joke here]. Yet major league baseball officials act as if this is still the dead ball era and the players sell insurance in the off-season instead of training.)

When the Cavs came back out at halftime, the Indians were still batting in the 2nd inning. The inning didn't end until that third quarter was almost half over. By this point, Yankee fans had long since stopped watching the drubbing in favor of seeing James dominate a playoff game like few players can. And by watching James, I mean that they were watching like a teenage boy watches late-night Cinemax and fantasizes.

James is clearly the object of desire to New York fans and while this seems to scare Cleveland fans I see it as the crowning achievement of local civic pride. It's one thing to lose CC Sabathia to the Yankees. It was inevitable. There were only a few teams that could really afford him and baseball operates on the same kind of business model as Enron used to.

But James is not just another star athlete biding his time in Cleveland, he's homegrown. He grew up in the four corners of Akron and every accomplishment he's had since the first time he dunked a basketball on

a regulation hoop (which was probably in first grade but since it was pre-YouTube we lack the video verification) has been done either within a 35-mile radius of Cleveland or on behalf of a team in this area. This may be his sixth season in the NBA, but the locals have known him far longer than that.

With the Knicks again not a part of the NBA playoffs, New York fans were again relegated to adopting a team to follow in the same vein that Browns fans have been forced to adopt a team every year since the Super Bowl started. The Cavs are clearly their team. Unlike the disappointment they were loudly expressing at anyone in a pinstripe jersey on Saturday, New York fans were just as loudly voicing their support for the Cavs in general and James in particular. (Here's still another aside: I use the term "voicing" because of its generic character, recognizing that I'm probably not doing much justice to what was taking place. In actuality, there was all manner of high-fives being issued, shrieks of delight were ever present, as if the New York fans had suddenly turned into teenage girls and were at a Jonas Brothers concert, and more than a few f-bombs were being dropped, but in that way where the f-bombs are expressing appreciation, not derision, like "that was a f-ing good pass. It sure the f--- was.")

If you're a Cleveland sports fans, ask yourself when was the first, last or anytime in between that you were the envy of New York fans? You have something they want in the person of James and a team like the Cavs. And it's not a money issue. In fact, the Cavs hold all the cards if money is the issue when it comes to James.

Indeed, the only way James ends up in New York is if he thinks that

presents him with the best opportunity to win multiple championships. Right now and by the time James has to finalize that decision it's hard to see how the Knicks could get themselves into that position, at least relative to the Cavs.

Stranger things have happened. It's what keeps the Cleveland fans fretting. It's in the genes. While you have to have a healthy respect for all that's happened to Cleveland sports fans, still they just have to know that right now they not only get to cheer on the world's best player but they do so knowing that every connection he has to that world is in this area, not New York and in the Cavaliers, from Dan Gilbert on down, is a functional organization that has more than proven their ability to put together a championship-caliber team. All the Knicks under owner James Dolan have done is proven that the Browns can never win an award for the worst run franchise.

Even as they were delighting at James and drooling at the notion that he'll be in a Knicks uniform soon enough because, hey, it's New York, they occasionally were forced to witness the carnage of that second inning at the expense of their beloved Yankees, mainly because of the media timeouts during the basketball game. The Shoo homer didn't do in the Yankee fans. That would have been the Cabrera grand slam. But even before that 14th run was recorded, Yankee fans were predictably bitching about George Steinbrenner and Brian Cashman. The few Mets fans in attendance had double-wide smiles and the few Red Sox fans at the bar had by now pulled out their hats that they were keeping tucked in their pockets initially.

It's fascinating that this Indians team, of all the Indians teams in

the last 15 years, owns a few all-time records against such a storied franchise. When some kid living in the Bronx whose not even born yet turns 12 and is looking at a digital baseball record book that he accesses on his mind-controlled iPod and sees that the 2009 Indians hold the all-time record for most hits and runs in an inning against the Yankees and the most runs scored in the second inning of any baseball game ever, he'll be as amazed as I was when I learned that the Monkees didn't play their own instruments.

Even as the Indians dropped Sunday's game after the bullpen again collapsed and even if the Cavs don't sweep the Pistons or, God forbid, not win the NBA Championship, at least we'll always have Saturday. As my daughter said to me as we exited the ESPN Sportszone to venture out to Sephora and a little "her" time, "this is a great day for Cleveland sports." It certainly was.