

## In Praise Of Smitty

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}  
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By most measures, Joe Smith has made a pretty doggone good NBA career for himself. He's played fourteen seasons, which is accomplishment enough, and he's stayed around long enough to score more than 11,000 career points. He's made a lot of buckets, a lot of friends, a family, a music career on the side, and he even played Connie Hawkins in an HBO movie once. It's safe to say he's been blessed. And he's come up huge for the 2009 Cavs. Jesse fawns over Joe in his latest.



By most measures, Joe Smith has made a pretty doggone good NBA career for himself. He's played fourteen seasons, which is accomplishment enough, and he's stayed around long enough to score more than 11,000 career points. He's made a lot of buckets, a lot of friends- the word &quot;affable&quot; is frequently employed in discussions of his personality and his brow is forever furrowed in an expression of good-natured bemusement- and he's made a whole lot of money over the course of his eleven-team odyssey around the Association. He's got a family, [a music career on the side](#) , and he even played Connie Hawkins in an [HBO movie](#) once. It's safe to say he's been blessed.

Problem is he's labored under the curse of expectations. Joe was the [top overall](#)

### [pick](#) [1995 NBA Draft](#)

of the

out of Maryland, where he enjoyed a stellar two-year career and won the Naismith Award as a sophomore. Unlike Antonio McDyess, Jerry Stackhouse, Rasheed Wallace and Kevin Garnett- the next four players taken after him that year- he has never made an All-Star appearance. He's been the consummate journeyman. More than a third of the Association's thirty franchises have tailored a uniform for Joe at some point, sometimes twice. At every stop, he's been solid on the floor and in the clubhouse. But there's always been the lingering feeling that the sum of his career has never quite amounted to his lofty status on Draft Day '95. Pretty good is nice, but teams aren't looking for pretty good with the top pick. They're looking for great.

He's also rarely been a winner. Most of Joe's career has been spent in NBA backwaters where the yearly prize is either a ticket to Lottery Land or a lukewarm cup of coffee in the postseason. Prior to last season with the Cavaliers, Joe had never been out of the opening round of the Playoffs. The best team he played for before coming to Cleveland- the Timberwolves- were perennial first-round fodder, a ship of doom best symbolized by the illicit under-the-table contract that resulted in a [league-sanctioned punishment](#) which all but wiped out the future of that franchise. That fatal contract was, of course, signed by Joe Smith. The fiasco seemed to capture his career in a nutshell: a good player whose contributions weren't worth the price.

But after playing out of a suitcase for so long, Joe has finally found a place to unpack and be appreciated for what he brings. He's a critical piece in Cleveland, providing scoring and rebounding off the bench to a team that was sorely in need of both before his [arrival from Oklahoma City](#) in March. His work ethic and professionalism have been hailed by his teammates, and his skill, smarts, and just all-around Joe Smith-ness have been embraced by Cavaliers fans who love him as if he's played here ten years. In this town, he's anything but a disappointment.

And in Friday night's Game Three in the Palace of Auburn Hills (where he played as a Piston back in 2000-01) Joe took all those years of unfulfilled expectations and postseason frustrations and unleashed them on his former team. With LeBron

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hounded and pounded by Detroit's defense, Mo and Delonte unable to throw a beach ball into Lake St. Clair, Big Z cooling down after a torrid first half, and the Pistons threatening to work up the nerve to actually win a game in this lopsided series, the Cavaliers needed someone to provide a spark. Joe the Journeyman provided it.

In an eight-minute run spanning the third and fourth quarters, with the outcome in the balance, Joe scored twelve points and grabbed five rebounds. His offensive rebound and put-back vaulted the Cavaliers back in front late in the third after they'd squandered a seven-point halftime lead. His three-pointer from the left corner put Cleveland on top to stay at 61-58 with 9:49 left in the fourth quarter, and he stretched the lead to multiple possessions with a lay-up and a from-the-wing eighteen-footer that found nothing but cotton. Joe's fingerprints were all over the 21-4 fourth-quarter run that turned a white-knuckle affair into the rout that gave Cleveland a 3-0 series lead. If not for him, it might be 2-1.

As I like to say of another, younger, more heralded first overall pick, Joe Smith's timing was impeccable.

So no, maybe he wasn't quite up to the billing that accompanied him out of Maryland. But for this team and this town, he's worth every word out of David Stern's mouth back on that summer night in 1995 when his name was called first. On Friday he was indispensable, a prime-timer on a championship aspirant delivering a performance that, if this journey ends in a parade, will be remembered in these parts for years to come. It has been a long career in the shadows for Joe Smith. He's in the sunshine now. He's earned it.