

Where It Went Wrong

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Sunday, June 07 2009 7:00 PM -

If the unthinkable happens and LeBron James walks away from Cleveland in the summer of 2010, Jesse says that we can look back at another summer, five years ago, as the time in which the seeds for the disaster were sown. The Cavaliers, then led by General Manager Jim Paxson, had a chance to put together the core of a potential championship team. Jesse calls it "the lost summer of 2004", and writes about it for us this morning.



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It was the summer of 2004, but professional basketball in Cleveland was in a springtime state. The 2003-04 Cavaliers had missed the Playoffs for the sixth consecutive season, but their 35 wins were the most for the franchise since 1998, and nearly double the total for the woeful 2002-03 team. In his rookie season, LeBron James had lived up to his pre-draft hype- and then some. The 19-year old averaged 20.9 points, 5.9 assists and 5.5 rebounds and had performed brilliantly despite playing much of the season out of position at point guard. His outside shooting needed work and he turned the ball over too much, but there was no doubt that the kid was the real deal, a true franchise player.

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What's more, it seemed that the Cavaliers' version of Michael Jordan had found his Scottie Pippen, ready-made. 22-year old power forward Carlos Boozer had emerged from the obscurity of second-round draft status in 2002 to post impressive numbers in his sophomore season- 15.5 points and 11.4 rebounds with a sparkling 52.3 percent from the field. Strong around the hoop and smooth with the jumper out to 18 feet, Boozer was the perfect pick-and-roll partner for the precocious James, who already possessed one of the keenest floor games in the Association.

Even missing the Playoffs by a game was a stroke of good fortune. For the Cavaliers were far from a finished product, and could use the opportunity of the lottery to improve their young roster. More than anything, they needed a point guard. Jeff McGinnis had done a solid job in the role since being acquired from Portland in mid-season for Darius Miles, but he was a shoot-first player more than a distributor. He was also a mercurial personality with a penchant for clashing with coaches and destroying team chemistry. McGinnis had performed admirably as a stop-gap, but as a permanent piece he left a good deal to be desired.

With the tenth overall pick in the 2004 Draft, the Cavaliers had a variety of excellent prospects from which to choose. Andris Biedrins, Sebastian Telfair, Al Jefferson, Josh and J.R. Smith were all available. So was the man they should have picked, the man I wanted them to pick (you're going to have to trust me on this one); Jameer Nelson, point guard from St. Joseph's. As a senior, Nelson had combined with Delonte West to form the best backcourt in America, one that had led St. Joe's to an undefeated regular season and a spot in the NCAA Elite Eight. The Naismith and Wooden Award winner, Nelson seemed like the perfect fit for the Cavaliers, a catalyst who could move LeBron back to his accustomed small forward spot, feed the rock to the scoring frontcourt of Boozer and Zydrunas Ilgauskas, and turn Cleveland's Big Two into a Big Three.

Only the Cavaliers didn't take Nelson- or Biedrins, or Al Jefferson, or the Smith boys. Instead General Manager Jim Paxson, in his infinite wisdom, selected Luke Jackson, a 6'7" shooting guard from Oregon. Paxson thought Jackson would make a nice athletic counterpart to LeBron on the wing, improve Cleveland's dismal outside shooting, and as a four-year college player, be ready to contribute

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at the NBA level right away. None of these things transpired. Hampered by a series of knee and back injuries, Jackson played just 46 games in two seasons with the Cavaliers and averaged 2.7 points. In October of 2006, he was unceremoniously shuffled off to Boston for center Dwayne Jones, a teammate of Jameer Nelson at St. Joseph's.

Nelson, meanwhile, went to Denver with the 20th overall pick. The Nuggets then traded him to Orlando, where he commenced a career that culminated in an invitation to the 2009 All-Star Game. While Nelson developed into a solid player, Cleveland's point guard problems continued. McGinnis wore out his welcome by the middle of the 2004-05 season and the Cavaliers were left with more years of turmoil at the position before trading for Mo Williams in the summer of 2008. In the meantime, the first five years of LeBron's career had vanished into the haze.

It got worse. Exactly a week after the 2004 Draft, Gordon Gund and Jim Paxson released Carlos Boozer from his contract, intending to immediately re-sign him to a below-market six-year, 42-million dollar deal. But Boozer had other ideas. Reneging on his verbal promise to re-up in Cleveland, the forward instead signed a front-loaded, 65-million dollar contract with the Utah Jazz. In one fell swoop, LeBron's Pippen had flown the coop, leaving the King a lonely monarch indeed. Paxson hastily acquired Drew Gooden and Anderson Varejao to fill the hole at power forward, but neither player could ever replace Boozer's consistency and scoring punch.

2004 represented Cleveland's last opportunity to improve itself through the lottery. Paxson made sure of that when he removed lottery protections on the 2005 first-rounder he sent to Boston for the immortal Jiri Welsch. That pick- the 13th overall- could have been used on Danny Granger, Hakim Warrick, Nate Robinson, Jason Maxiell, Linas Kleiza, or David Lee, just in case you were wondering. But no matter. The real,

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irreversible damage had already been done the previous summer.

The Cavaliers could have gone into the 2004-05 season with LeBron James, Carlos Boozer and Jameer Nelson on the roster. That's the core of a potential championship team. Given LeBron's brilliance, it's not unlikely that this group, augmented by the right mix of role players, would have already brought a Larry O'Brien Trophy to Cleveland. But it didn't happen. Instead, the Cavaliers struggled to find the right pieces with which to surround their superstar, wasting whole seasons of his career in the process. In the meantime, they moved into that NBA purgatory- not good enough to win a title, too good to land the premium draft picks which are so important to building a great team. Cleveland's highest choice since 2004 was the 19th overall last season, the selection used on J.J. Hickson.

We're still paying the price for the lost summer of 2004. Let's just hope we don't end up paying the ultimate price.