

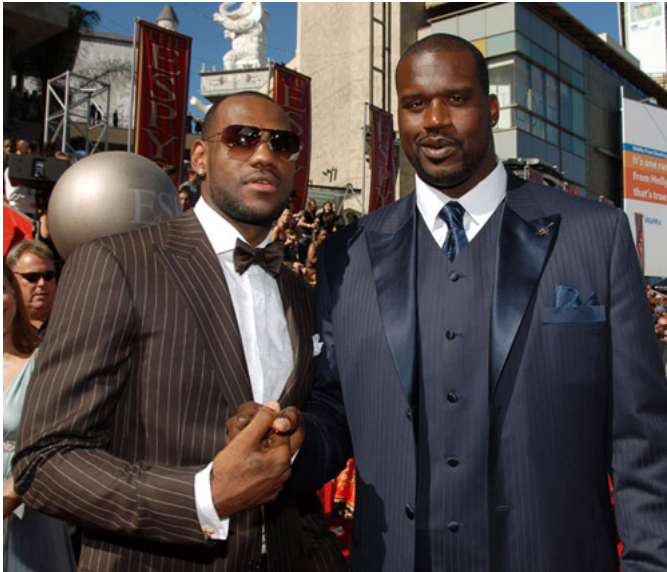
## The King & His Court

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, June 16 2009 7:00 PM -

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Shaquille O'Neal is a polarizing figure. Not Charles Barkley polarizing, mind you, but polarizing nonetheless. O'Neal represents either the last piece of the puzzle or a distraction this team doesn't need. In Gary's latest, he wonders aloud ... how does LeBron feel about it?



My daughter cringed at the television Monday night as Jim Donovan was reporting that the Cleveland Cavaliers' interest in acquiring Shaquille O'Neal from the Phoenix Suns. She wasn't the only one.

While she really couldn't offer up a solid reason why she had such an adverse reaction, my guess is that it has more to do with his acting and rapping career than his basketball skills. Maybe she just doesn't want another player on the team that can't make a free throw.

Whatever it might have been, one thing is certain. O'Neal is a polarizing figure. Not Charles Barkley polarizing, mind you, but polarizing nonetheless. O'Neal represents either the last piece of the puzzle or a distraction this team doesn't need. Personally, my only question is how does LeBron James feel about it?

If James is for grabbing O'Neal, assuming it's not at the expense of Moe Williams or Delonte West, then so am I. More importantly, so will be Dan Gilbert, Danny Ferry and Mike Brown. When you currently have the game's best player under a tenuous one-year contract, the front office paradigm inevitably shifts.

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You'd have to be incredibly naïve to think that the Cavs won't follow James' lead on this one. His official title is "player" but it might as well be "all powerful Oz." Nothing will happen to the make up of this team unless it comes with James' seal of approval.

This, of course, puts the team in a pretty tight little jam, a jam that gets tighter the longer James waits to commit to the Cavs for more than another year. Rightly, the quest of the official management troika has to be to surround James with the players he wants to make a run at next year's title. James is a basketball savant with a singularly rare ability. Brown and Ferry have good basketball instincts, but nothing in either's background suggests a James-like understanding of the game. James has court awareness that extends well beyond the reach of mere mortals. If he thinks the answer is O'Neal, then James has earned the benefit of that doubt.

The problem, though, is that it is the franchise that could find itself left holding the bag for a lot of salary and players it wouldn't otherwise want on a James-less team. In other words, the Cavs could easily and quickly become the New York Knicks if it doesn't work out and James is done in Cleveland after next season.

Putting aside those particularly difficult issues for the moment and no matter which camp you may find yourself in with respect to O'Neal, you have to admit that having him in Cleveland would keep things interesting. O'Neal's best days may be behind him, but his star power is intact. Outside of Kobe Bryant, O'Neal represents about the only other player in the NBA right now that could fairly share the celebrity spotlight with James.

For James, that's probably a good thing. Though he never seems to get tired of it, it would probably benefit James for someone else with some gravitas to step forward and take the pressure off him of always having to be the face of the franchise. O'Neal isn't always the most compelling interview, particularly after games, but he's willing to venture off the cliché-ridden path just often enough to keep the media breathing down his neck every step of the way. Every moment

with O'Neal is one less distraction for James.

O'Neal had one of his better seasons in recent memory last year, averaging nearly 18 points a game and 8 rebounds. But late in games he's still a liability because he is such a gawd-awful free throw shooter. He's also 37 and has 17 seasons behind him and a decent injury history. With his size and weight, there are only so many more trips up and down the court his knees can take. He's moody, too, in a Randy Moss sort of way, and sometimes exhibits the same work ethic as Moss. He's not without risk. But if the cost is relatively reasonable, as in Ben Wallace/Sasha Pavolic reasonable, then the risks are manageable.

If O'Neal does end up in Cleveland it also sets up an interesting &quot;legacy&quot; issue for James. For reasons that I still don't quite understand, the theme of this year's NBA Finals was whether Bryant could win a title without O'Neal. The implication was that Bryant wasn't good enough on his own to do it.

Here's a newsflash. Bryant wasn't good enough on his own to win the NBA title. Either is James. Either was Michael Jordan. The league might be built around superstars, but the rest of the players aren't window dressing. The reason it took Bryant so long to win a title after O'Neal left Los Angeles was because he had a sub-par supporting cast. As it got better, so did the Lakers' chances of winning the title. The same thing will play out with James.

Still, if O'Neal comes to Cleveland and the Cavs do win the title next year, some will saddle James with the same set of unfair baggage that has dogged Bryant for these many years. Then James will have to prove himself all over again once O'Neal leaves town, at least in the eyes of certain media members too lazy to do anything but draw surface level conclusions about far more complex issues.

It seems rather doubtful that James would let any of these kinds of backdrop issues affect his thinking about whether or not O'Neal in a Cavs uniform makes

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sense. But James has a healthy ego so anything's possible. In that case, the Cavs will have to turn elsewhere and turn they will.

The larger issue that the Cavs really are addressing in the courtship of O'Neal or, if not him, then what amounts to a younger, if slightly less effective O'Neal, is how to deal with Dwight Howard. Apparently Howard will be a fixture for years to come in Orlando even though he has a similar contract situation as James. The difference is that Howard has been far clearer in his desire to remain in Orlando. Knowing that, the Cavs have to build a team that can match up with any of the contenders in the Eastern Conference, and Orlando looks to be one for awhile or forever find themselves where the Mark Price/Brad Daugherty/Larry Nance Cavs found themselves-one player short.

The NBA is a league of match ups. The Lakers may have been on a mission after losing out to the Celtics a year ago, but in truth they matched up far better with the Magic than did the Cavs. Howard wasn't ineffective against the Lakers, just merely mortal. The Lakers had enough of an answer for him to make their quest for this year's title more of a stroll than a struggle.

The Cavs have to get to that same place as well. If that's with O'Neal, so be it. If it's someone else, that's fine, too, just as long as they do. Whatever James want, because that, perhaps more than anything else right now, is what will keep him in Cleveland. Without the King, in the near term there is no court.