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The upcoming NBA season could be a memorable one in Cleveland. Talentwise, the Cavaliers are poised to field quite possibly the best team in franchise history. They might not take the league by storm and win 66 games like last season's squad, but they're going to win a lot of games and strongly contend for the NBA title.

Given the Magic's loss of walking mismatch Hedo Turkoglu, and the unavoidable age and injury issues enveloping the Celtics, it's realistic if you'd like to peg the Cavs as the early favorites to win the Eastern Conference. Certainly, Shaquille O'Neal gives the Cavs their own age and injury issues, but a slowing Shaq is still 7'-1" and 325 pounds. His size alone is a weapon.

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An early-summer memorandum from the league office, predicting a sharp decline in the 2010 salary cap figure, might have thrown some foam on the fire. But it didn't put the flames out. And by late next spring, it's going to be a conflagration.

LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh headline what might be the deepest and most star-studded free agent class in league history. For several years now, teams across the league have been angling for next summer, acquiring expiring contracts, pinching their pennies, all in the name of reeling in a big fish next summer.

In Cleveland, it means that we're going to have to really work to enjoy the upcoming season to its fullest. The biggest prize is LeBron, and for the next 11 months, regardless of how outstanding or lackluster the Cavs perform, the leaguewide conversation will center on where he will play in 2010-11 and after.

By next summer, when New York honks like Tony Kornheiser and Stephen A. Smith have promoted the idea of LeBron as a Knick for the thousandth time, when Yahoo's Adrian Wojnarowski has written his 500th column blasting Cavs management for their ineptitude in assembling a team around LeBron, when Bill Simmons has half-jokingly predicted that the post-LeBron Cavs will become the new Seattle Sonics by 2015 (you know it's coming), when we've heard for the zillionth time from the likes of Charles Barkley about what a backwards stinkhole Cleveland is, and why on Earth would anyone stay in that dirty little town if given the chance to get out, us Backwards Stinkholites will be well, more than a little weary of it all. Maybe we're already reaching that point.

If you live in Greater Cleveland, and you want a shot of civic pride, national NBA coverage might not be the best place to get it for the next year or so. Cleveland is going to be trashed from all sides, writers and TV yakkers will have LeBron pre-emptively signed, sealed and delivered to the open arms of New York, be it the Knicks or Nets, and pre-column chin-stroking from national scribes will have LeBron casting his lot with every team from the Heat to the Clippers.

LeBron can't really put the kabosh on it, because speculation is one of the staples of 24-hour cable news networks, be it hard news, sports, celebrity gossip or otherwise. But he can withdraw from the situation with his previously-established company line of "I'm happy in Cleveland, I've never given an indication that I want to play anywhere else, but I'm not going to discuss my free agency in any greater detail until next summer. Right now, I'm all about helping the Cavs win a championship."

Instead, LeBron stirred the drink a bit with his comments Friday, during the media event to launch his new Nike sneaker line. He was asked if he would consider

signing an extension with the Cavs prior to becoming a free agent. This was his reply:

"I signed a contract in 2006 with an option. It would make no sense for me to sign that contract if I didn't keep my options open," The Plain Dealer [quoted him as saying](#). "I'll let you fill in the blanks."

All of that is true. LeBron signed a shorter extension to keep his long term options open. However, the tone of his remarks is a little jarring if you're a Cavs fan looking for any reassurance that King James is still leaning toward re-upping with the Cavs next summer. There was no mention of his satisfaction with his situation in Cleveland.

He did mention that bringing national events, like his Nike shoe launch, to his hometown of Akron "is big for me," but it bears mentioning that LeBron almost always makes a distinction between Akron and Cleveland in his remarks. As residents of Northeast Ohio, we tend to lump the two cities in the same general region, separated by a county line and 30-odd miles of Interstate 77.

But to LeBron, Akron is home. Cleveland is where he works. For LeBron, the benefit of playing in Cleveland is that it's close to Akron and his Bath Township home in Summit County. It's a big benefit, but if you think LeBron feels the same attachment to the "216" as he does the "330," that's probably not the case.

It's not necessarily an indication of his chances of re-signing with the Cavs, but anyone who wants to believe that hometown loyalty is going to be the deciding factor had better forget about sentimentality. LeBron's hometown loyalty is to Akron, not Cleveland, and there's a difference, at least to LeBron.

It's easy to overanalyze LeBron's comments on Friday -- particularly what was not said. Did the extremely disappointing playoff loss to Orlando rock LeBron's blissful marriage with the Cavs to the point where he is seriously considering a move? Is LeBron trying to cover his tracks after Trevor Ariza made public his reported comments about staying with the Cavs? Or do we all just need to take a chill pill?

Given that we all need to get through the next 11 months without going completely nuts, I'd choose Option C. Rationally, LeBron has numerous reasons to re-sign

with the Cavs. It's a 40-minute car ride from central Summit County. He can find privacy here. There aren't paparazzi waiting to hit him with volleys of shutter-clicks every time he leaves his house. Most importantly, the Cavs can offer him the most money, most years and highest percentage raises on a new or extended contract.

That will not change, per the rules of the NBA's collective bargaining agreement. Any other team that wants LeBron will have to make an airtight case to him as to why he should leave the Cavs' money on the table. And next summer, that will be a lot of money. A lot more than the three years and \$65 million max he could be extended this summer.

Based on everything I've seen this summer and in summers past, free agents are all about the money. Charlie Villanueva and Hakim Warrick were among the free agents that spurned the Cavs to play for less-competitive teams, because the less-competitive team had more money to offer.

There is the ever-present "LeBron needs to conquer New York to conquer the world" argument, but the national media types who contend that LeBron can't become a worldwide icon and billion-dollar athlete playing in small-market Cleveland obviously haven't been paying attention to their own content for the past six years. In the age of 24-hour cable networks and instant Internet access, the media's spotlight is very portable. If LeBron played in Siberia, they'd find him, cameras in tow. ESPN and their competitors are actually disproving their own anti-Cleveland arguments with their obsessive fawning over LeBron.

But all the rational arguments in the world can't appeal to the irrational what-if monster inside our own heads. The hungry monster that gets fed every time the Cavs lose, every time we hear more speculation, every time we see another talking head tell us that the Cavs haven't done right by LeBron, that he needs to resurrect the Knicks for the good of the league, every time we read that another writer has had an encounter with a "source close to LeBron" who, invariably, never has anything good to say about LBJ's chances of staying with the Cavs.

Unfortunately, LeBron likes to feed the what-if monster, too. And he will do just that over the next year, honing his skills as a conveyor of non-committal soundbites. He has his reasons. Some of them are legitimate, some of them are because he loves the attention and wants to keep his name in the headlines.

The best-case scenario is if LeBron re-signs next summer. As the next year progresses, however, we might come to the conclusion that the second-best outcome is that, should LeBron leave, we're so fed up with the media circus, the flirting, the suspense, the New York self-righteousness, the national media taunting and Cleveland-bashing, that we almost welcome his departure as a chance to regain our peace of mind.

We all want to see this relationship between Cavs fans and LeBron to continue to be positive and fruitful. But in the end, if it doesn't work out that way, it's best that the split be a mutual decision. And to that end, there's hope -- if you want to call it that.

If LeBron is sick of Cleveland and the Cavs a year from now, there is a good chance that we're also going to be sick of him. Blasphemy? Get back to me next summer, when we'll know for sure.