

Great Cleveland What-If's: The 1976 Cavaliers

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Wednesday, January 20 2010 7:00 PM -

Forty-six years and counting Cleveland fans. 1964. Our last pro sports title. Some call it a curse. Jesse Lamovsky calls it a drought. And in this latest series from Jesse, he's taking ten of the biggest heartbreakers of the Cleveland Sports Drought, putting them under his microscope, and giving our readers his somewhat-educated opinion on whether or not any of these disasters really deprived us of a World Championship for the city of Cleveland. Today, he starts with the 1976 Cavaliers and their "bad break".



Over the years, championship-famished Cleveland sports fans have latched onto a series of traumatic events as the source of their many laments. Had any one of these events been wiped from the records, the collective memory goes, we wouldn't be talking about 1964 as the last year of a C-Town title; we'd be talking about 1987 or 1997 or 2007.

But with one notable exception, none of those events directly cost a Cleveland team a championship. Had the Browns beaten Denver at any or all points in the late '80s, they still would have had to beat the NFC Champion in the Super Bowl. Had Craig Ehlo's lay-up with three seconds left been the game-winner of Game 5 against the Bulls in 1989, and not the Shot, the Cavaliers still would have been three full playoff rounds away from an NBA Championship. Had the Indians hung on to their 3-1 series lead over the Red Sox in the 2007 ALDS, there was still the World Series to be played. And so on and so forth.

All we can do is speculate and say "What if?" And that's what I'm doing

Great Cleveland What-If's: The 1976 Cavaliers

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Wednesday, January 20 2010 7:00 PM -

here. I'm taking ten of the biggest heartbreakers of the Cleveland Sports Drought, putting them under my microscope, and giving you my somewhat-educated opinion on whether or not any of these disasters really deprived us of a World Championship for the city of Cleveland.

Before I start, I do have one thought for those of you who believe in such things. There is no Cleveland Sports *Curse*. It's a *Drought*- freakishly long and laced with the perverse- but a drought all the same. And like all droughts, this one has organic causes. There's a logical explanation for everything that has gone wrong with Cleveland's teams since 1964. And for the most part, are explanations have been rather simple.

On to the countdown, beginning in 1976 with the Miracle of Richfield Cavaliers, and a bad break on the way to an NBA Championship:

What if... Jim Chones hadn't broken his foot prior to the 1976 Eastern Conference Finals?

Background: In [1975-76 the Cleveland Cavaliers](#) posted their first-ever winning season, going 49-33 (third best in the NBA) and winning their first and, until 2009, only division title. In the first round of the Playoffs they toppled the defending Eastern Conference Champion Washington Bullets in a dramatic seven-game series, taking the finale 87-85 on [Dick Snyder's left-handed lay-up](#) with four seconds to go.

A sixth-year expansion franchise as 1975-76 opened, the Cavaliers were 6-11 when they acquired 35-year old center and Akron native Nate Thurmond from the Chicago Bulls. One of the all-time defensive stoppers, Thurmond wasn't the same

Great Cleveland What-If's: The 1976 Cavaliers

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Wednesday, January 20 2010 7:00 PM -

force he'd been in his youth, but he was a galvanizing presence both for his 17 minutes a night backing up starter Jim Chones and for the leadership and wisdom he supplied to the club. Cleveland never looked back after acquiring Thurmond, going 43-22 and winning the Central Division by a game over Washington.

Seven of the 1975-76 Cavaliers averaged double figures in scoring and ten averaged more than fifteen minutes per night. They were deep, balanced and they were also stingy, giving up the second-fewest points in the NBA. This wasn't the LeBron-era Cavaliers, blessed with a transcendent star, or the late '80s-early '90s Cavaliers with their Big Three of Price, Daugherty and Nance. The 1975-76 Cavaliers were a team without stars, a delicate balance of chemistry, coaching, and role players that knew their roles and played them flawlessly.

But if there was one irreplaceable part, it was Jim Chones. One of college basketball's first hardship cases, the former Marquette star led the Cavaliers in scoring in 1975-76 at 15.8 points per game. Along with Thurmond, Chones was the key to Cleveland's airtight defense and the team's match-up trump card. Between the two, who combined for 20 points and 14 rebounds a night, the Cavaliers rarely suffered a moment of poor center play.

Chones's injury, incurred in a practice just before the start of the Eastern Conference Finals against the Celtics, shattered the equilibrium of the team. Going it alone against Boston's brilliant center Dave Cowens, Thurmond performed valiantly- but the task was too much for the old pro. The [Celtics toppled the Cavaliers in six](#) games and went on to defeat Phoenix in the Finals. Cleveland's chance had come and gone. The Cavaliers would not advance that far in the postseason again until 1992.

What If? To a man, the veterans of that 1975-76 Cavaliers team swear that with a healthy Chones in the lineup they would have defeated Boston and gone on to

Great Cleveland What-If's: The 1976 Cavaliers

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Wednesday, January 20 2010 7:00 PM -

win the title. And although they are biased, they definitely have a point. An intact duo of Chones and Thurmond would have been a load to handle both for Cowens and for Phoenix's gifted rookie pivot man Alvan Adams. [Boston was](#)

[aging](#)

- the

average age of its starting five was thirty- and not very deep, with none of its bench players averaging more than 14.7 minutes per night. The Celtics had to struggle to dispatch a crippled Cleveland team and a Suns team that finished just two games over .500 in the regular season.

Boston did have one edge on the Cavaliers with or without Chones- home-court advantage by virtue of its 54-28 regular-season record. But the Garden leprechauns would have been hard-pressed to overcome Cleveland's youth and far superior depth. I'm with Austin Carr and his teammates here- the Cavaliers would have beaten the Celtics with Chones in the lineup. And had they done so, they would have had the inside track to the title. The team with the NBA's best record, 59-23 Golden State, was [upset](#) by the [42-40 Suns](#) in the Western Conference Finals. Cleveland would have had home-court in the Finals- and the volcanic Coliseum crowds would have been the final piece in the Championship puzzle.

Of course, 1976 is still a pretty damn long time ago in sports terms. Even had the Cavaliers won it all that year, the city of Cleveland would still have the longest championship drought of any three-team town. You wouldn't have to be old to remember the last title. But you'd have to be middle-aged.