

Great Cleveland What-If's: The Shot

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
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After years of hopelessness, Cavaliers fans suddenly found themselves rooting for a team with an embarrassment of potential, one that seemed to have greatness as inevitability rather than a goal. Price, Harper, Daugherty, Nance- they were local legends in their own time, the city's biggest hope for a Championship. But there was an all-time legend matriculating in Chicago, and on May 7th, 1989, he made a shot that sent Craig Ehlo and every high hope Cleveland had crashing to the floor. The Shot doomed the Cavaliers to be the eternal caddy of Michael Jordan and the Bulls. Cleveland fans would have to keep waiting for their Championship.

Maybe it was never meant to be for that team. Maybe the presence of His Airness would have been too much either way. But it's tempting to wonder what would have happened had that Shot rattled the rim and fell out.

What if... Michael Jordan hadn't made the Shot in Game Five of the 1989 first-round series against the Bulls?

Background: Blessed with an explosive young core of talent, the Cavaliers came onto the scene [in 1988-89](#) with the subtlety of an F5 tornado, racing out to a 43-12 start that included a franchise-record eleven-game winning streak. Even with a late slump, Cleveland finished the season at 57-25, tied with the Lakers for the second best record in the NBA. The Chicago Bulls, meanwhile, [had struggled](#) through an inconsistent, injury-plagued season, finishing a disappointing 47-35- including a 0-6 record against the Cavaliers. To casual observers, the first-round series between the teams seemed to

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be no contest.

But Chicago had Michael Jordan and was getting healthy, while the Cavaliers were beat up and struggling after their brilliant start. The Bulls wasted no time stealing home-court advantage in the best-of-five series, winning the lid-lifter in the Coliseum, and moved to within one game of the clincher with a Game Three win in Chicago Stadium. But the Cavaliers pulled out Game Four in overtime- thanks largely to a couple of free throws that Jordan bricked late in regulation- to steal back the home court and send the series to a fifth and deciding game back in Richfield.

Game Five was a white-knuckle affair, one of the classic dogfights in NBA Playoff history. The teams traded salvos throughout a furious fourth quarter, neither able to land a knockout punch. The lead changed hands eight times in the final two-and-a-half minutes. With three seconds left, Craig Ehlo- who was sensational with 24 points, including 15 in the fourth- drove for a lay-up that put Cleveland up 100-99. But three seconds was way too much time for Michael Jordan. Taking the inbound pass, His Airness pulled up at the top of the key and [drained the jumper](#) that sent the Coliseum into dead silence- and the Bulls to the second round.

What If? Well, first off, keep in mind that this was a first-round playoff series. Not the NBA Finals, not even the conference finals- a first-round series. Even had the Shot rimmed out, the Cavaliers still had to win twelve more games in order to secure an NBA Championship. That's a long way to go.

Secondly, the Cavaliers were not a healthy basketball team. Mark Price missed the opening game of the Chicago series with a groin strain; Ehlo missed Game Three with an ankle injury, and Brad Daugherty had a hip pointer and was almost completely unproductive. Cleveland did not have a very good bench- they went seven deep, with Ehlo and Hot Rod the only major contributors- and lacked the reserves to overcome their physical problems. The Cavaliers wouldn't have gotten any healthier in the second round against New York or, provided they made it that far, in the Eastern Conference Finals against the Detroit Pistons.

[Third, there were the Pistons](#) . The defending Eastern Conference Champions were white-hot, going 37-6 down the stretch and sweeping Boston and Milwaukee in the first two rounds of the Playoffs. Detroit went nine deep with Vinnie Johnson, Dennis Rodman, John Salley and James Edwards coming off the bench. They had eons of experience from battling both Larry Bird's Celtics and Magic Johnson's Lakers deep in the previous two postseasons. Indeed, Detroit had participated in more Playoff games in 1987 and 1988 (thirty-eight) than Cleveland had in the

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entire history of its franchise (thirty-two.) They were ferocious and physical on defense and they had a legitimate go-to guy in Isiah Thomas.

Cleveland may very well have gotten by the Knicks in the second round. New York was on fumes in the Playoffs, worn down by Rick Pitino's frenetic style, and lost to Chicago in more decisive fashion than Cleveland had. But there is no way the Cavaliers would have beaten Detroit in a series. The Bad Boys were too talented, too deep, too physical, too experienced- and they were on a mission after losing a heartbreaking Finals series to the Lakers the previous year. It would have been nasty, brutish and short.

Really, the Shot wasn't about winning an NBA Championship, at least not in 1989. It was about getting the edge on a rival of the present and the future. Like Cleveland, Chicago was one of the youngest teams in the league- Jordan, Pippen and Grant were 25, 23 and 23 respectively- and both teams expected to challenge for the championship early in the next decade. They needed to go through one another first. Chicago had beaten Cleveland in the '88 Playoffs, but the Shot established the hierarchy for good- the Bulls as the mighty, the Cavaliers as the meek. Cleveland never came that close to besting Chicago again.

It may not have made a difference in the long run had it missed. Scottie Pippen wasn't going anywhere, Phil Jackson still probably would have replaced Doug Collins, and the Bulls would have charged on. But the psychological effects of the Shot can't be measured. After that day Chicago always knew it could beat Cleveland, and Cleveland always doubted it could beat Chicago. Ownership had been established. To get the best of the Bulls in that type of situation, to pass them in fact as the biggest challenger to Detroit's reign... it would have meant a lot. How much, we can only wonder.