

## Lingering Items--Leadership and Desire Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, May 08 2010 7:24 AM - Last Updated Saturday, May 08 2010 12:10 PM

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If you're the kind of person than tends to live vicariously through others, then Friday was your night. And who better to live through then LeBron James anyway?

After the embarrassing home loss of Tuesday night, Cleveland Cavaliers fans were openly questioning the desire and intensity of their team and, in some sense, themselves. How could a team this good not simply come out and impose it's will on an inferior opponent? Don't they have what it takes to be champions? Don't they realize that this is probably the best shot to claim a championship that most of them will ever see? If only I had worn my lucky shirt or screamed at the television screen a little louder things might have been different.

The run-up to Friday's game featured all sorts of soul searching. But in the end the fans' consensus was that this team had to somehow come out and take it to the Boston Celtics, whatever that means.

Now we know exactly what that means. Watching James in that first quarter Friday night, fans got to witness something that actually takes place far less often then we think: a player literally putting his imprint on a game and forcing an outcome from the outset.

There was a point early in that first quarter when the Cavs, aggressive though they were, committed four straight turnovers and all fans could possibly be thinking at the moment was, here we go again. If Tuesday night's game proved anything it's that wasted possessions are like a gift to the opponent. You only get so many opportunities to put the ball in the hoop. Squander too many of them and you'll find yourselves constantly chasing your tails, kind of like the Cavs on Tuesday and certainly like the Celtics Friday night.

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But those four straight turnovers were merely a blip in a game that was far more perfect than Tuesday's game was dreadful. To the fans calling the talk shows and posting on the message boards, the ones telling James exactly what he had to do as if they were puppeteers merely pulling at his strings, Friday night's game was abject proof that certain players do understand what is exactly at stake.

When critics discuss important movies, they mostly talk about the auteur, the person who puts his or her stamp on the movie. Martin Scorsese is an auteur. People go to see a movie just because he directed it. Robert Redford and Clint Eastwood are auteurs. They can and do carry a movie by their presence.

It's the same thing in sports. Sometimes the auteur is the coach. Sometimes it's the player. In the NBA, it's LeBron James. He's not only the league's most recognizable player, he's achieved a rarefied status that few achieve in any walk of life.

Though it's not exactly a State secret, James has established himself as one of the great team leaders in the history of professional sports. Take James away from the Cavaliers and it's still a pretty good team. It's probably not a team that realistically competes for a championship but it is a playoff team nonetheless and perhaps even a team that gets into the second round of the playoffs.

With James, though, this team is special. He's the director and the star, playing a role that few if any could even imagine. He's the reason people tune in. Even Celtics fans on Friday night had to be amazed at what they were witnessing in that first quarter.

It's not just that James is the best player in the NBA and thus is bound to make any team better. It's more that he's such a great leader, such an inspiration to the rest of the team that they can't help but become better themselves.

This is no knock on head coach Mike Brown, but does anyone really think that J.J. Hickson would be seeing meaningful minutes on any other playoff team at the moment? Hickson's development is a product of James' mentoring much more than Brown's coaching. Mo Williams

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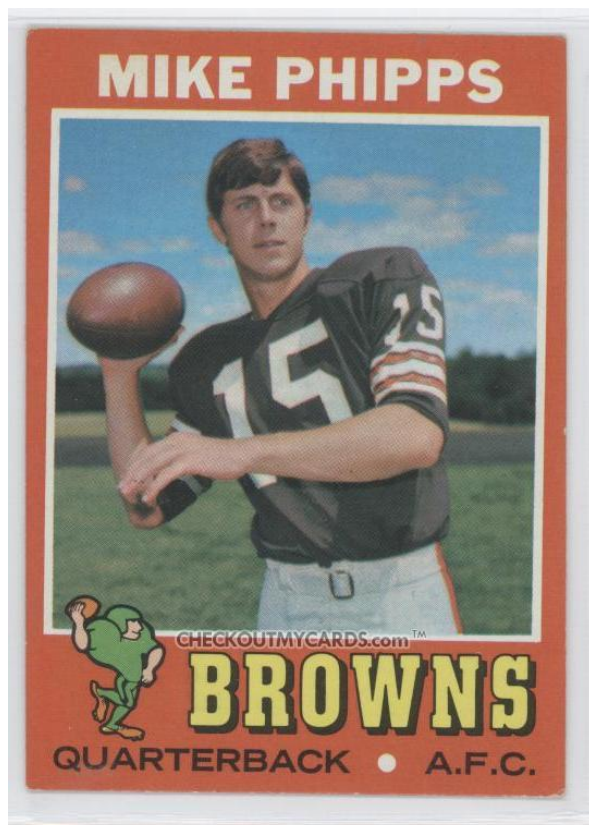
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is a nice player but he's a far better player on this team with James. Is Delonte West still in the league if not for James?

Watching the Cavs absolutely dismantle the Celtics on Friday night was a singular pleasure mostly because it buried the lingering ghosts of Tuesday night's mystery. It told fans that their faith in James wasn't misplaced and that he is one of those few athletes that can actually be counted on to singularly turn back a potentially destructive tidal wave.

Now it's the Celtics' and their fans turn to question themselves. The biggest problem for them, though, is that they don't have someone like James to turn to for the answers.

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It was hardly a surprise that the Oakland Raiders cut quarterback JaMarcus Russell this past week just as it won't be much of a surprise when some other team picks Russell up. It's not that Russell lacks talent, it's that he lacks desire.

The stories filtering out of Oakland, many of which were no doubt planted by the Raiders themselves in order to lessen the public sting of such a colossal draft failure, lays the blame for Russell's failures at his feet. By several accounts it's not so much that Russell made playing quarterback look effortless it's that he actually gave less effort. Falling asleep in meetings, not keeping himself in peak condition, not fully grasping the team's playbook are among the list of Russell's sins.

Russell's fate is reminiscent of former Browns' quarterback Mike Phipps. The Browns, in a trade that was as disastrous as any personnel move made in franchise history, shipped receiver Paul Warfield to Miami so that they could draft Phipps, a hot shot quarterback out of Purdue, with the third overall pick in 1970.

The Browns were still coached by Blanton Collier, one of the great minds in NFL history. The story Collier used to tell about Phipps gives a little insight to what the Raiders went through with Russell. After the Browns drafted Phipps, Collier took to personally trying to school the new quarterback, spending countless hours going over the nuances of the pro game. Collier said that after one classroom session in which he had been trying to explain all manner of the intricacies of running a pro offense, he looked down at Phipps' notebook and he hadn't even bothered to take a single note. Indeed, every page in the notebook Collier had given him was still blank.

In retrospect it turned out to be the most obvious clue that the Browns had made a mistake. Yet because the pressures teams faced then aren't nearly the same as they face now, the Browns kept Phipps for 7 seasons before setting him adrift. In that time, Phipps was mostly awful. He completed about 48% of his passes. He had 40 touchdowns against a staggering 81 interceptions. Phipps then went to the Chicago Bears where he survived 5 more seasons. He pushed his completion percentage to 52% during those 5 seasons but he only had 15 touchdowns against 27 interceptions in mostly part time play.

It's hard to imagine at the moment that Russell could possibly last 12 years in the NFL. Surely some team will take a chance on him, mostly because there are few really good quarterbacks in the league at the moment. But Russell isn't going to get magically better by simply going to another team, just like Phipps didn't magically get better by going to the Bears.

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Russell will need to literally transform himself into another person, which will be nearly impossible. If, as the number one pick in the draft, he couldn't find the desire to succeed, why would he suddenly find it by moving on to another team?

That's what makes the NFL draft such a crap shoot. Picking the right players is about so much more than physical skills. Yogi Berra's words about baseball apply equally to football. Ninety percent of the game is half mental.

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I've never been much of a fan of Bruce Drennan but you sometimes have to give him his due. After the Indians blew a 9<sup>th</sup> inning lead against Toronto the other night when second baseman Luis Valbuena booted a routine grounder that should have been the last out of a certain victory, it was enough to send Drennan into orbit, and that's saying something.

Drennan isn't exactly known for his subtlety, but from the opening salvo of "we stink, we stink" to his concluding words "did anybody remind them that his is the major leagues?" he put together what was as good of a stream of consciousness rant you're likely to ever hear. In those 5 minutes, he captured at the flashpoint the frustration that Indians' fans are feeling about players like Valbuena, Jhonny Peralta and Russell Branyan. Do yourself a favor [and listen to it](#). You're bound to feel better:

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With all the talk about whether or not Colt McCoy will play this season, the question to ponder is

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simple: Why does anyone think it will matter?