

Wait 'til Next Year, Again (and Again and Again)

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Friday, May 14 2010 7:58 AM - Last Updated Friday, May 14 2010 8:51 AM



As the Cleveland Cavaliers were putting the finishing touches on another bad loss to the Boston Celtics, a loss that left them still in search of a championship, about the only positive thought worth mustering was the fact that the loss provided the perfect bookend to what has to be about the most miserable 12 months in Cleveland sports history.

The only worry now is whether it's really the end or only the middle of an extended period of darkness. But let's not get ahead of ourselves for the moment.

Starting with the loss to the Orlando Magic last season, there has been almost nothing positive to root for in Cleveland sports. There have been little victories here and there, temporary respites really from the crushing reality of what it really means to be a Cleveland fan. But on a macro basis, it's hard to imagine how things could get much worse.

The Cavs had a difficult series with Orlando last year in which its flaws were exposed. At that moment there was no certainty that Cleveland could find a way to close that gap only hope that the best and most passionate owner in Cleveland, Dan Gilbert, would somehow find a way to close that gap.

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In the midst of the Cavs' troubles that ended a season far too early once again, the Indians were embarking on their own brand of misery. It was only a matter of time before Cliff Lee, the reigning Cy Young award winner, would be traded and everyone knew it. Heck, the same thing happened the season before with CC Sabathia. Fans here are conditioned to the team's sagging economics. The team finished 65-97, only one game better than the Baltimore Orioles.

But beyond just the trade of Lee, it wasn't as if the Indians gave their fans much of a reason to believe that this team would be any better any time soon. The players the Indians received in exchange for Lee were the usual prospects. Fans knew then as they know now that if they're lucky one of these prospects will eventually get good enough to trade for a new set of prospects so that the sad cycle can continue.

Grady Sizemore pulled up a bit lame in spring training last year and never seemed to get healthy. His season was just another downer on what has been a regression-laden career and eventually he shut it down in September. The only question anyone really had in all of that was why the Indians waited so long. They weren't going anywhere anyway.

Travis Hafner couldn't recover enough from his shoulder injury or the mental goblins that have inhabited him since his 2006 season ended. When he did play it all it did was remind you that he used to be someone special. Oh yea, it also reminded you that the Indians were on the hook for millions to him, choking off any chance at financial flexibility that a struggling under-capitalized team like this needs.

Then, of course, there was Eric Wedge. The now-former manager was his usual puzzling self, getting off to another slow start in April, sticking to long with and making excuses for players like Jhonny Peralta, afraid to ruffle the feathers of any of his players. Wedge was always so empathetic with the struggles of his players and quick with excuses about the team's problems. General manager Mark Shapiro finally had enough of what had turned into a one-note song and mercifully pulled the plug on his tenure, as if it would matter.

Indeed it didn't much matter. For reasons still never fully explained, Shapiro thought it would be a good idea to hire Manny Acta who had washed out earlier in the season with the even more awful Washington Nationals. It was a nice metaphor, actually. Instead of reaching up for someone with a history of success the Indians once again reached down for failure on the if/come. The next person that can explain cogently explain the difference between the Indians

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this season under Acta and last season under Wedge will be the first.

As the Indians season faded into the background of late summer, the Browns arose not like a Phoenix from the ashes but more like the groundhog in February. At least the season marked another new beginning for a team that hasn't gotten any of its previous beginnings right. It didn't get off on the right foot from the outset.

After deciding a hard re-start of its systems were once again in order, owner Randy Lerner rushed into hiring Eric Mangini, a failure in New York, because Mangini met Lerner's most important criteria: previous NFL head coaching experience.

After Mangini conducted a draft that was mostly bizarre, trading around the first round like he was Monty Hall on a bender, he eventually assembled a team of very average draft choices and spare parts that the Jets, his former team, were more than willing to let go.

This was only a prelude, however, to what was easily the worst quarterback competition in the history of organized football. Mangini painfully tried to structure it so that each quarterback had exactly the same number of opportunities as if he were a parent trying hard not to look like he favored one kid over another. In the end all he did was ensure that neither player would be ready for the season, something he spectacularly accomplished, by the way.

The season itself was a nightmare of historic proportions. It featured equal parts anarchy and insurrection as Mangini proved that when it comes to running a franchise he was in way too far over his head. Anxious to put his mark on every aspect of the franchise, all Mangini did was prove that he suffered greatly from little man's syndrome. He quickly made an outcast of his handpicked boss. But on the positive side he played the role of Captain Bligh well as seemingly dozens of his players were standing in line to play Fletcher Christian.

Lerner had finally seen enough and decided to search for what he termed a credible leader of the franchise. He landed on Mike Holmgren, thus creating the most positive thing to happen to Cleveland football in 10 years.

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The team then ended on a positive note winning its last four games in the most improbably of fashion. It did it by repeatedly pounding the ball with Jerome Harrison, a running back that Mangini had marginalized early in the season. But when that season ended there still wasn't a fan that believed this was a team capable of competing for a spot in the playoffs anytime soon. In a breath of fresh air honesty, Holmgren essentially agreed.

But we had the Cavs to look forward to, or at least we thought we did. Gilbert and general manager Danny Ferry seemed to do just about everything right. They plugged a major hole in the middle by signing an aging but still marginally effective Shaquille O'Neal. They orchestrated trades in a way that brought even more pieces at almost no cost.

What was apparent but mostly ignored throughout the season was that this team seemed to lack any real chemistry. It's focal point, as always, was LeBron James and the pecking order was established from there on down. O'Neal complied and openly seemed to be thrilled not to be the spotlight. And yet there was no real hunger with this team. It knew it was good and often won just by showing up.

An inkling of what was to come played out over the last 10 days or so of the regular season as the Cavs, content with having sewed up the league's best record, rested and went through the motions on their way to losing out. It was equal parts arrogance and indifference, the two most glaring characteristics of their disjointed and down right weird series with the Celtics.

No one will ever be able to pinpoint one root cause to the Cavs' failures. But if you're in search of a theme, start with the arrogance that seemed to overtake this team. For a team that had never won anything, it sure acted as if it had. All of the wasted possessions, turnovers and poor shooting were the markers of a team that really hadn't been taking care of its business for just more than one series.

It's interesting to wonder whether, 12 months from now, we'll be looking at things and remembering now as a time when things looked positively radiant by comparison. Perhaps, but there's no need to wallow.

Sure the Indians aren't going to get any better, but you knew that going in. The fundamentals of that organization are just wrong. The Browns, on the other hand, finally have a clear direction

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run by real honest to goodness professionals with a track record. It may not lead to the playoffs next season, but they are clearly on a path that every one can discern.

The Cavs are at a crossroads. Until the question surrounding James' future gets answered, it will remain in organizational limbo. Right now the uncertainty gripping this franchise makes everything look bleak.

Whose to say though that faith won't be rewarded? Who says James is even leaving? He hasn't. Sure, Cleveland fans have been down this road before with the Indians and pick the free agent. But the Cavs' situation is far different. They can offer the most money. They have an owner who has proven that he won't spare any expense in the quest. We live in an age where a mogul like James' physical location is mostly irrelevant. Rather than just assume he'll leave, what's to say that he won't become the team's biggest salesman and help it bring in a key free agent or two to make this team even better?

See, this is really what it means to be a Cleveland fan. You may be numb after all the tough losses during all these tough years, but we've always had the ability to find some semblance of a silver lining. We've hung in there this long. In the grand scheme of things, what's another decade or two? We can do that standing on our heads.