

For Cavs Fans, Summer of Exhaustion Begins

Written by {ga=samamico}

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The Cavaliers' season has reached its untimely and annoying conclusion, courtesy of a 94-85 loss at Boston in Game 6 of the Eastern Conference semifinals. Now begins the longest summer in Cleveland sports history.

There are hundreds of questions, plenty of allegations and even a few hints of mutiny.

Most of it is speculation, much of it media creation. But no matter what you hear between now and when LeBron James finally signs a new contract, all you need to know this: No one really knows.

Not the writers in New York, not the analysts at ESPN, not the radio guys in Juneau, Alaska. No one, anywhere, can say what LeBron will do. Not yet, and probably not anytime soon.

If we know LeBron, we know he will drag this on longer than the O.J. Simpson car chase. Except the stories about LeBron's free agency will involve more drama and perhaps a little less sanity.

That said, here are some pretty safe bets:

* Cavs coach Mike Brown is a goner, maybe by the time you read this. Anyone who thinks Brown is solely to blame for the Cavs' collapse is kidding themselves -- but he is taking the fall.

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And he is at least partially responsible, if not mostly. The players either just got sick of hearing his voice or grew unsettled with his bizarre substitution patterns and failure to make the right adjustments. Either way, he will not be coaching the Cavs next season.

* James will say plenty of things that make you go hmmm. He will toy with the media and fans, and not always on purpose. He really will make a decision at some point, and probably wouldn't mind if everyone outside his inner circle goes away until he does. Still, anytime he says anything other than "I'm re-signing with Cleveland," Cavs fans everywhere will feel a little queasy.

* Rumors will be abundant and reach ridiculous stages. A lot of reporters are hanging on James' every word, breaking down his mundane post-game press conference and trying to turn it into something meaningful. But here's the truth: James said NOTHING. He dropped no clues, gave no indication as to where he might end up. That's not good, because it gives everyone the freedom to just make stuff up. And they will. Repeatedly. And when they are done, they'll do it some more.

* You will read at least one story about how the Big Three of this year's free agent class -- James, Miami's Dwyane Wade and Toronto's Chris Bosh -- have grand plans to join forces and all sign with the same team. That may be true, but that's all they will ever be: Plans. James and Wade may be friends, but they would likely be miserable playing next to each other. Both are gimme-the-ball-and-get-outta-my-way stars, and that type of marriage rarely lasts. It's one thing to make it work for a month during the Olympics; it's quite another when you're talking about an 82-game season.

* There will be few stories about the possibility of James returning to the Cavs outside of Cleveland. Few will mention how James will have to take a paycut in salary if he signs elsewhere. Few will bring up how many less shots he will get if he were to play with Bosh or Wade. And even fewer will consider his statement of wanting to win a championship, or that of the teams that can sign him, the Cavs still offer him the best chance to do so. But more than anything, he'll have to take an immediate and almost significant paycut in salary. No matter how much money you make, few in the American workforce are willing to do that. Still, don't expect that to be part of the coverage of James and free agency.

Now that we got those things out of the way, here are some predictions:

* James won't sign in Cleveland before he is courted by everyone else, and you can't blame him. What 25-year old wouldn't want to be fawned over in some of the world's biggest cities and by some of its richest and most famous people? It would be admirable if James worked the "hometown hero" angle, talked about how he still has unfinished business with the Cavs (and boy, does he ever), and re-upped, much like the L.A. Lakers' Kobe Bryant and San Antonio's Manu Ginobili did a month ago. Then again, Bryant and Ginobili have won four championships apiece. They obviously get their satisfaction in ways different from James.

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* John Calipari won't be James' next coach. At least, Calipari won't be James' coach in Cleveland. Yahoo Sports quoted a source that claimed Cavs general manager Danny Ferry would walk before he hired the too-cool-for-school Calipari. That is believable, and if true, admirable on Ferry's part. Ferry is the man who makes the basketball decisions, and even if James is the one who fails, it's Ferry's reputation that's on the line. So Ferry should, and will, pick his own coach. Otherwise, his contract is also expiring and if things don't go the way he wants, he can simply grab his golf clubs and spend his winters in the Bahamas, far from any headaches.

* Shaquille O'Neal won't come back. Nor should he -- not unless he is willing to play 10-15 minutes a game in a backup role. As likeable as he is, Shaq has become a hindrance in that he too often gets in the way, and is a non-factor when it comes to rebounding. Age and wear and tear have robbed him of an ability to shuffle his feet on defense or get any lift on his shot on offense. And it's no coincidence Phoenix couldn't make the playoffs with him last season, then reached the Western finals this year without him. Especially when you consider the Suns didn't really even bother replacing him. They just got rid of him.

* Zydrunas Ilgauskas will be back. Much of that depends on who the Cavs hire as their next coach, but if there is anyone who doesn't care for Brown, it's Z. Brown failed to utilize him in the playoffs and didn't give him the first regular-season game in which Ilgauskas could have set the franchise record for games played. But Ilgauskas can still get it done, and if the Cavs can find someone who can do the things they were hoping to get from Shaq (blocked shots, rebounds, the athleticism and length to stand in the way of Orlando's Dwight Howard), Ilgauskas can still be productive.

* James will sign another three-year deal with the Cavs after his free-agent Tour of Global Speculation. That way, he'll only be 28 when his next contract expires, giving him the liberty to be courted all over again and not forever be known as someone who failed his home state. Jamison, Mo Williams, Anderson Varejao and maybe even Delonte West will all return, too -- but under a new coach and in an entirely new system.

* All of this won't be as messy as it seems right now. Phoenix is a good example of that, as former Cavs guard and current Suns GM Steve Kerr was supposedly toast following last season. But he put the right coach (Alvin Gentry) in place, stuck with what had been working and got a little lucky. A year from now, Cavs fans could be laughing when they look back at this summer, and all the worries it is sure to bring.

All of that said, is it possible James will sign with another team this summer? Oh, you had better believe it. He's receiving pressure from people close to him to do exactly that. He may not realize it right now, but this is clearly the best spot for him if what he says about winning is true. Still, one of those nightmarish (to Cavs fans) rumors could come true.

LeBron really could join the Nets and their new Russian billionaire owner, along with Kentucky's John Wall (expected to be the top pick in the draft), Bosh, and holdovers Brook Lopez and Devin Harris. That is what was predicted by former NBA coach Avery Johnson, and it would in fact be a pretty good team pretty quickly.

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But remember, until James actually signs, it's all just a lot of hype, and we had all better get used to it. Just try not to throw up in the process.

Sam Amico covers the Cavaliers for NBA.com and is a regular contributor to SportsTime Ohio and The Cleveland Fan.