

Thinking the Unthinkable

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

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It is July. LeBron James, continuing his quest to become a true “global icon,” has bolted Cleveland for the bright lights and a *really* big city. What now, Cleveland?

While much has been written about what LeBron donning a Knicks or Bulls jersey would mean to those cities, little has been written about what it would mean to the City of Cleveland. The topic cannot fully be explored in a thousand words, but we can shed some speculative light on possible repercussions and ramifications.

Obviously, if LeBron left Cleveland, fans in droves would begin jumping out of Terminal Tower windows, the Cavs would go winless for the next hundred years, the Cuyahoga River would dry up, the Detroit-Superior Bridge would collapse, the Cleveland Symphony would disband, and the city itself would shrivel up and die.

Okay, I’m being facetious; the consequences wouldn’t be quite that dire. But, at least for starters, that mammoth “We Are All Witnesses” sign on the Sherwin-Williams building downtown would have to come down, lest irate fans start spray-painting FU’s all over it. The real changes would soon follow.

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The Owner

Dan Gilbert paid \$377 million for LeBron and company in 2005. According to *Forbes* magazine, the franchise was valued at \$477 million in 2008, so we're talking at least half-a-billion (that's "billion" with a "b") dollars today. If LeBron departed, the franchise's value would drop into the \$350 million to \$375 million range--meaning Gilbert would have to absorb an immediate loss of \$125 million, minimum--in one day. Not even to Dan Gilbert is that peanuts, and he wouldn't take it lying down. He would realize that, in order to recoup at least a portion of his investment, the Cavs would have to be rebuilt.

But how do you replace the best player in the universe? You don't--even another superstar on the order of Dwyane Wade or Chris Bosh would be a step down. Gilbert would have to somehow procure a triumvirate of outstanding, multi-talented players on the order of Mark Price, Brad Daugherty and Larry Nance in their heyday.

The Cavs' owner certainly has the financial wherewithal. But that said, it would still take him some time--two to four years absolute minimum, since LeBron would no longer be a drawing card for prospective free agents, and Gilbert has cast the team's fate with a rookie general manager.

The Team

One need not turn back the pages of history very far to see the precedents that exist. Michael Jordan left the Chicago Bulls in 1996, and they have barely recovered. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar left the Milwaukee Bucks in 1975, and 30-some years later *they* have barely recovered. Rebuilding in the NBA is a Herculean task, no matter what financial resources are available. (For proof, just look to Dallas, Mark Cuban and the Mavericks.)

Shortly after LeBron's departure, Z and Shaq-Daddy--both of whom are getting long in the tooth--might decide it is time to hang up the old sneakers or, at the very least, play elsewhere. That would leave the Cavs with plenty of working space under the salary cap for 2010-2011, but their long-term prospectus would suffer greatly. Their current roster is composed of little more

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than role players--excellent role players, but role players nonetheless. Mo Williams and Antawn Jamison, freed from having to watch LBJ dribble the ball around for 32 minutes a game, might be able to take up some of the scoring slack, but even that's a stretch.

Best-case scenario? Battling for the eighth seed in the playoffs for a couple of years. Worst-case scenario? The pitiful New Jersey Nets. The dysfunctional Los Angeles Clippers. The (shudder!) hapless Cleveland Cadavers of the (shudder!) Ted Stepien era.

The Fans

Until recently, the Cavs have not been any Clevelander's favorite pro sports team. For some unknown reason, that honor is largely reserved for the Browns, no matter how bad their record is.

So interest in the Cavaliers would quickly wane, just as it's done for the Indians lately.

Instead of heading down to the basement with beer in hand three nights a week to watch Cavs games on a 20-year-old black-and-white Zenith, Joe Fan might opt to spend time with the family watching "American Idol" on the big flat-screen in the living room. Night-time ratings on the FSN television network would suffer greatly, perhaps to the point of dragging down the whole enterprise.

Shoot, Joe Tait might even call it a career--and to some (myself included), that would be worse than LeBron leaving.

The Q could well become a mausoleum. Why? Because that was the case before LeBron arrived on the scene, before he was supposed to "light up downtown like never before," before the Cavs were year-in and year-out championship contenders. Rest assured: If the team languishes, no amount of belching flames, screaming floor announcers, scantily-clad cheerleaders, half-time circus acts, and/or goofy mascots will fill the arena.

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Of course, jersey No. 23 would quickly disappear from the streets of Cleveland, and TCF message boards would be filled with bitching and moaning about the Cavs' plight, even as they today are filled with similar lamentations about the Indians and the Browns (at least until November). Sadly, sports fans would, en masse, default into their age-old psychosis of "waiting for next year."

The King

The pride of Akron would go from a contender to a pretender.

If he went to the Big Apple, he would be playing home games in front of adoring, standing-room-only crowds in what the media there say is "the world's most celebrated basketball arena." He would be a regular guest on Letterman. The New York newspapers, the major television networks, ESPN and TNT would worship him. Shoe companies would flock to his doorstep, heaping vast amounts of money upon him. He would attend Broadway plays, hobnob with Jay-Z and Spike Lee, and speak at Kennedy Center events.

If he went to the Second City, he would pass the Michael Jordan statue on his way to work every day, but would never come close to equaling His Airness's six league championships. Every day, he would feel the weight of that incomparable legacy bearing down upon his shoulders.

In either case, LeBron would average 30 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists per game. He would be selected to the NBA All-Star team every year and win his share of MVP awards.

But if he ever had an off-night, he'd be pelted with venomous criticism. It would come from either the obtuse fans and the pantywaists that call themselves sports reporters in that hellhole of an island city to our east, or from the obnoxious fandom on Lake Michigan who will never, ever, ever betray their undying loyalty to Air Jordan -- especially not in favor of some rube from Akron, Ohio, of all places.

And every night LeBron would dream about the good old days with the Cavaliers when he

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actually *enjoyed* the game. When he played on a great team. When he was the toast of Ohio. When his family and mansion were just a hop-skip-and-jump from the Q.

When he was “The King.”