

## When Perception Becomes Reality

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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At the moment, the Cleveland Cavaliers management team is in flux and because of it the perception is that the team itself is a mess. After all, its head coach has been fired and their designated target replacement turned them down. There's a new general manager in place but no one seems to know it.

Yet they just completed a season in which they again won the most games in the entire NBA. They fell short, spectacularly short, in the playoffs and their best player may be headed elsewhere, but that's been the case since he signed his last contract. In other words, for the second straight season it's been mostly the status quo.

Meanwhile, perched across the plaza from them are the Cleveland Indians, as stable of a management team that exists in baseball today. The perception is that a number of factors outside of their control, including a bizarre and unfair economic structure that baseball allows to exist, make it difficult for small-market teams like Cleveland to be successful and so it's not a surprise that they aren't.

Yet on the field the Indians are mess of a team. Whatever economic hardships that baseball inflicts on them, and they do, it is still a team with no unifying theme, populated with veteran has beens and young maybes that loses, spectacularly so, night after night after night after night.

But to hear fans in Cleveland talk, you'd think it was the Cavs, not the Indians, laboring under an elevated security code level.

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The danger is when fans allow perception to become reality. It gets fed by writers like Bill Livingston claiming that Cavs owner Dan Gilbert is an activist with too much ego to be successful in professional sports. You then have other writers, local and national, scratch their heads at the release of Danny Ferry as general manager. Finally you mix in the ongoing uncertainty of LeBron James and the notion that Tom Izzo turned down the head coaching gig and all of the sudden it's easy to conclude that the Cavs are viewed as a franchise on the decline.

Hardly and the reason I know that is because of that franchise perched across the plaza from them. If you want to see a once glorious franchise careening down a 45 degree hill without any brakes, the Indians are your ticket.

Each day that goes by, the picture of the Cavs gets a bit clearer instead of more muddled, particularly with respect to the on-court product. The post-Cavs NBA playoffs made us all realize that Cleveland fans were mostly sold a bill of goods, starting with the acquisition of Shaquille O'Neal and continuing with the trade for Antwan Jamison, that all the parts were in place for the beginning of what might be a multi-year run at the NBA championship.

What we found out, when the hype was stripped away by a Boston team that was, at a minimum, better coached is that this Cavs team had flaws. O'Neal doesn't exactly heal with the blood of a 23-year-old anymore and could never really get untracked for the playoffs after sitting out the latter part of the season with a thumb injury.

Jamison is a nice player but his best days, too, are long gone. He's got some interesting moves around the basket and can find a way to score and once in awhile can get on a run but for the love of God the guy is awful from the free throw line and is slower on defense than the kid in your gym class with his pants hitched up to his navel and playing in street shoes. Mo Williams showed that the 2009 version we saw of him in the playoffs was no mirage. He's a good 82-game player who can't yet cope with the pace and intensity of the playoffs. Maybe he never can.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. In a sober moment you really can see the problems in this team that the playoffs exposed. That doesn't mean it wasn't a good team. It just means it wasn't good enough to win a championship.

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Time will tell whether Gilbert was right in dumping Ferry and head coach Mike Brown, but at this juncture nothing about either move looks particularly crazy nor does it brand Gilbert as an impatient and impetuous owner whose ego outstrips his skill. In fact, Gilbert's track record demonstrates that he reserves for himself the biggest of all decisions, as it should be, and then get mostly out of the way. The next time he storms the court to protest a referee's call or takes to an internet blog to rage against the NBA machine will be the first time.

If Gilbert is an activist owner, what does that make Randy Lerner? He and his family have owned the franchise for more than a decade now and all he's down is rebuild from the foundation up every few years as if on cue.

Maybe Gilbert's tinkering this off-season is making fans nervous, but his moves pale in comparison to the many, many missteps of Lerner over the years. Are fans really looking the benign neglect of owners like the Dolans. It's Lerner's incompetence as a decision maker that has ruined the Browns for a generation of fans, not his intent. As for the Indians, it's the Dolans sleepy existence as owners that is mostly responsible for recreating the glory days of the 1970s.

Let's start with Lerner. He's demonstrated, like Gilbert, a willingness to spend money. What he lacks, though, is a commitment to excellence. He says he wants a winner but then disappears for long stretches of time to pursue his other interests. Not a crime, certainly, but not the act of someone consumed with success. It shows in the results.

As for the Dolans, the best way to illustrate their tenure is to look at the bankrupt performance the Indians put on against the Pittsburgh Pirates this past weekend. In the course of three games, the Indians let the Pirates not only stop a 12-game losing streak but also start a two-game winning streak. In doing so the team played the kind of baseball that would embarrass most American Legion teams.

The errors and missed opportunities on the field this past Sunday defined both the team and its ownership as well as anything I've seen or heard in years. The core of the problem is that the Dolans and Shapiro have become so practiced at creating the perception that the team is financially handicapped that it has now become their reality.

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As a result, the team no longer defines success by wins or losses on the field but by balance sheets and profit margins. It would seem like you can't have one without the other but actually many do and Indians are on that track. The guaranteed money generated in baseball from media revenue, combined with even modest attendance, can make a team profitable if it's payroll is small enough.

As a result, the Indians continue to shrink the payroll knowing that they can still eke out success as they define it irrespective of the product. All it does, of course, is to create a death spiral to the fans that actually care about such trivial things as wins. Just ask Pirates fans who have now seen their team go more than a generation without a winning record.

That's what dysfunction really looks like. What the Cavs and Gilbert are going through right now hardly approaches that level. They are simply experiencing the natural flow of any well run organization. It's just that in Cleveland fans always have had difficulty distinguishing perception from reality.