



We are all witnesses. Indeed. Witnesses to the fact that in the end, LeBron James turned out to be Art Modell with a better fashion sense.

Sitting in Greenwich, Connecticut at a Boys and Girls Club and announcing to the world that the Miami Heat is where he'll ply his trade next, James took a knife, edgy and dull, and carved a 6-inch valley in the middle of Cleveland's soul.

If you want to be placated by the charity angle to the whole thing, go ahead and be a Pollyanna. James co-opted the good intentions of a worthy charity in order to make himself look better as he sat, cynically, virtually ripping the heart out of a city and explaining, once again, that it's not about the money it's about happiness.

Remember this: when they say it's not about the money, it's about the money. Think of James leaving money on the table by not signing with Cleveland as a temporary thing, something akin to spending money to make money. James is officially a brand now and this is all about giving himself a bigger stage to make even more money off that brand.

Now of course the paralysis by analysis will begin anew, focusing as it will on whether James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh can all share the same ball and who, exactly, will take that last shot in a game that matters.

Then there is the small matter on whether James stacking the deck in his favor in order to enhance his chances at “multiple championships” (the catch phrase of the free agent season if ever there was one) really has the opposite effect on the legacy he's trying to create.

Let me dispense with that one quickly. No, it won't have the opposite effect. When James' career is over, it will be judged best in retrospect. And if that retrospective look includes a few championships, no one is going to much care how they were won. Does anyone think that Derek Jeter's career is somehow less because he plays along side Alex Rodriguez, or vice versa? Scottie Pippen is one of the top 50 or so best basketball players in NBA history and I've yet to hear anyone criticize Michael Jordan's legacy that was forged in large measure with Pippen's help.

What will matter, though, is James' reputation. As they saying goes, it takes a lifetime to build and a moment to lose it. That moment, of course, for James, serious by nature, playful at times, was the exact instant he put that stake in the heart of a city that's been killed a thousand times over anyway. At least in that, James' can't claim he was first. Sports disappointment, with its long and rich history on the North Coast, is about the only thing Cleveland seems to have mastered.

Actually, while Thursday night serves as the convenient marker for when James' reputation as a the consummate team player took its biggest hit, it's really been a reputational death by a thousand cuts since the season ended, actually ever since the Cavs were busy falling apart against the Boston Celtics.

James and his team, perhaps out of naïveté or perhaps out of callous indifference, have mostly looked like buffoons, with Thursday night's “show” being Exhibit A. But yet it's hard to be too critical in that regard when the adults in the room who should know better, like the executives running a major television network for example, willingly play into their hands by acting as if James and his manager, Maverick Carter, are the two most brilliant marketing minds since McMahon met Tate or Sterling met Cooper.

Truthfully, it will be difficult to ever consider James again in a purely basketball context. Over the last 7 years, basketball fans in general and Cavaliers fans in particular have been treated to some of the best basketball they're ever likely to see. They've had the chance to watch James surmount the seemingly insurmountable hype surrounding him when he came out of high school. In that process, never painful always fun, James has become the best basketball player on the planet.

There's probably still more upside to James' game, who knows. But this time the seemingly insurmountable hype James has to contend with is completely of his own making. It's one thing to live up to your own personal standards. It's another to create expectations in millions of others that can never be fully satisfied anyway and then spend each and every day trying to do just that. At least we'll find out whether James really is Atlas.

If you're a fan of the Miami Heat, and I suspect there's a whole bunch of folks jumping on that bandwagon about now, it's going to be difficult to level set yourself. Do you expect the Big Three to win a championship each and every year? Will you be satisfied with three titles? How about two? If the Heat win one title in the next six years, will that be considered a failure? See what I mean?

As well informed as James thinks he's been in this process, it isn't nearly as well informed as it could have been. Listening to everyone but relying on no one, James came to the simplistic of all conclusions without the wisdom and perspective that comes with age. At some point, probably long after he retires, James will give an interview from whatever mansion he's living in then and he'll reflect on this time in more melancholy terms. He'll regret the pain he brought to the city that raised him and he'll likely regret the fact that he gave the city its hobbling on national television.

Just don't expect that kind of reflection any time soon. For now and for as far as the eye can currently see, James will be resolute in trying to live up to just what he has wrought, without regret and without indifference. Time will change that.

The question is, will time change how Cleveland feels about James? Time hasn't much tempered the animosity toward Art Modell, nor should it. Whatever Modell's motivations, he had other options and yet, just like James, chose only what was best for him. So no, I don't think it will.

Maybe you do only really owe yourself and no one else. Modell and now James certainly think that way. But yet there is a point where you actually become a citizen, where you accept the responsibility of what your fleeting existence on this planet gives you. James isn't nearly as fully realized as he'd like to believe. I doubt he ever will be.

James can soothe whatever fractured feelings he's created for himself by staying close to the Akron community, keeping his basketball tournament alive and sponsoring a bike ride, too. He'll probably make Akron his summer home, mainly because the monstrosity of a house he built in Bath Township is unsellable. The only adapted use for it is a hotel and the street is zoned residential.

But spreading money around like that will only be about damage control, just like his cynical use of the Boys and Girls Club to temper the wrath his ego-fueled free agency created. He had a chance to make a real difference in this community for now and ever more and instead he just proved to be another mogul trying to take the shortcut to success. I'm not sure Cleveland would have been a tougher place for James to win a championship but even if it would be it just underscores that James never really was up to that challenge.

It's doubtful that most of the locals will wish James well as he and the other two musketeers practice their basketball skills for another town. Indeed, he'll be booed loudly and proudly every time he comes back to Quicken Loans Arena. But those are just little points in time, snippets in a far larger story that's only half-written.

The rest of the story is that life goes on for all of us, even James. It's an object lesson, once again, you're best to love the game and not the gamers. And it's some consolation, I suppose, that just as with Modell, James is still going to have to face up to his kids one day and explain why exactly he decided to sully a once great name. I have a feeling that when that time comes, even his kids aren't going to buy that whole happiness angle.