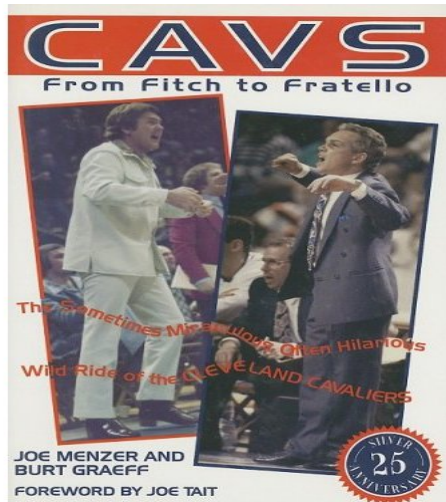


Contemplating 0-82?

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

Tuesday, July 20 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, July 20 2010 6:01 AM



If we've come to acceptance with one painful bit of reality over the past two weeks, it's that the Cavaliers won't win a single game in the 2010-11 season and the Miami Heat won't lose one.

Because LeBron James hung the moon in the sky and told the stars to shine, there can be no other possible conclusion, can there? After all, this team was not only structured completely around him, but had woven him into the very fabric of the franchise not unlike the way Cleveland's baseball team latched onto star second baseman Napoleon Lajoie a hundred years ago, going so far as to name the club after its star player. Surely, any team silly enough to put all its eggs in one basket like that is destined for complete disaster when that egg hatches and flies the coop. (And thus ends the egg-analogy portion of our program.)

Similarly, when LeBron pairs up with Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh like the three super villains released from the Phantom Zone in *Superman II*, they will be capable of not only dominating each and every game they play, but also bringing peace to the Middle East by the close of training camp.

But the Miami Heat – henceforth referred to as the “Hot Flashes” – is not our concern. Instead, we trouble ourselves over the poor joker left at the altar holding a basketball and his grandmother's wedding ring. Just as Miami is bound to go from a middle-of-the-pack pretender to the elite team in the Eastern Conference, aren't the Cavs just as predestined to drop from 60 wins to 60 losses?

Barring catastrophic injuries or legal troubles – the peanut butter and jelly of the NBA – the

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2010-11 Cavs won't be embarrassing. They won't be truly good by any stretch of the imagination, but nor should they remind us of the days when Walt Wesley led the team in scoring.

We can confidently cling to this theory not based on the potential upside of J.J. Hickson or on blind optimism for a Mo Williams resurgence, but rather on history.

Since the Boston Celtics went from 24 wins to 66 in one cynical swoop of free agency three years ago, it's taken as scripture that teams both improve and decline faster than a Browns' three and out. While there is a history of epic improvement with the addition of a key player or two (the '90 San Antonio Spurs with David Robinson, the '80 Celtics with Larry Bird, the '70 Milwaukee Bucks with Kareem), teams that lose Hall of Fame-caliber players don't turn into the Washington Generals overnight.

Remember when Michael Jordan unexpectedly retired (with seven more retirements to follow) just before the start of the 1993-94 season? After years of Jordan serving as their only roadblock, Cavs fans saw the path to the Finals open up like the Red Sea. We figured the Chicago Bulls would return to their rightful place in the NBA's Anonymity Division and start thinking about ping-pong balls and lottery Sunday. Instead, it was the Cavs that began their gradual march back to oblivion, while the Jordan-less Bulls racked up 55 wins (only two less than the year before *with* Jordan), beat the Cavs in the playoffs yet again, and nearly took out the eventual conference-champion Knicks in a fierce seven-game semifinal series. Yes, those Bulls had Scottie Pippen, but we'd spent the past three years telling ourselves Michael Jordan won all those titles completely on his own. Turns out, while no one was looking, the Bulls had developed a pretty strong core and it kept them competitive until two years later when Jordan decided to return (with six more comebacks to follow).

Three years earlier, the Lakers were the defending Western Conference champions (their fourth such claim in five years) when their heart and soul, Magic Johnson, announced he was HIV positive and was retiring. It was the first week of the regular season, and everyone figured the Clippers were about to become L.A.'s winning basketball team. Instead, the Lakers persevered, combining veterans at the tail ends of their careers (one of whom, it's worth noting, was Byron Scott) with unproven youngsters to win 43 games and make the playoffs for the 16th straight season. The following year, they posted their first losing record in nearly two decades, but still made the playoffs as the eight seed and very nearly knocked out top-seeded Phoenix in the first round. Three years after that, they were up over 50 wins again.

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The year after Milwaukee traded Kareem, the Bucks had the exact same record as the year before. The year after Orlando lost Shaq, it won 45 games and made the playoffs. When Rick Barry bolted from San Francisco to the ABA in 1967 after averaging a whopping 35 points per game, the Warriors' win total dropped by just one game.

In other words, history would suggest that losing a star player doesn't necessarily mean the entire franchise is on the verge of collapse. Keep in mind also that before these last two 60-win seasons, the Cavs won just 45, 50, 50, and 42 games – all with the Chosen One leading the way.

Granted, this is a far more emotional blow than Shaq leaving Florida for California, which in the eyes of the rest of America, is actually the same place. LeBron went on national television and ripped the heart out of Cleveland, *Temple of Doom*-style. In his wake, he leaves an economically crippled town that was never crazy about basketball in the first place.

With the well-entrenched Indians and Browns essentially giving away flatware to lure fans into the ballpark, things don't look good for the Cavs' long-term future. And with LeBron now crowned king of the drug capital of the western hemisphere, Cavaliers' attendance is sure to drop dramatically.

But in a relative sense, and perhaps as a silver lining to this miserable summer storm cloud, the number of victories will not.