

Silent Dan

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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It used to be easy to be a Dan Gilbert fan. How could it not be? The owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers was a do-something person with a history of success. Besides, compared to the owners of the other two professional teams in town, Gilbert is number one almost by default.

Gilbert got an undeserved reputation early on in his career as a NBA owner as being meddlesome. To the contrary, he came across as a committed owner willing to approach his franchise not like a toy but like another critical business in his empire. He recognized that his main job was to find competent people to run the basketball operations on a day to day basis and once that was accomplished he would sit back and enjoy the view from the preferred seats.

In fact that's what Gilbert did. It helped tremendously when the ping pong balls allowed LeBron James to fall into their laps. But Gilbert then did everything he could to capitalize on that fortune. That the Cavaliers fell short wasn't for his lack of trying.

Lately, though, Gilbert is trying the patience of even his staunchest supporters mostly because he's no longer the Gilbert that the fans were growing to trust. At a time when the franchise is struggling to find an identity, a face, Gilbert has adopted a bunker mentality as his team

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embarrasses its way through the 2010-11 season.

Since the whole James fiasco, in fact, Gilbert has changed and not for the better. The same goes for the front office. Instead of being out front, it comes across as left behind. The lack of noise is deafening. Meanwhile the fans are screaming as the team is in the midst of foisting upon its fans all the history it thought had been erased once Ted Stepien sold the team to the Gund Brothers.

Maybe there isn't much Gilbert could do anyway, but right now the Cavs are coming across as an organization that simply doesn't care. There is no evidence at the moment that anyone is in charge. Games appear on the schedules at regular intervals and losses pile up like the snow in Chardon. You don't even get the sense that anyone inside the Cavs front office notices, let alone sympathizes with what the fans that have to endure this disaster. If they do, they're doing a great job at hiding their empathy.

No one expected the Cavs to compete for a NBA title this season. Indeed, the playoffs always seemed like a bit of a long shot. But right now, 15 wins doesn't even look possible.

Injuries are hurting this team, certainly, but so too is the lack of leadership. James was every bit the straw that stirred the drink when he was in town but it's nothing short of amazing how small his supporting cast now looks with him gone. There isn't a leader among them, not one player willing to step forward in a meaningful way.

It would be nice to think that head coach Byron Scott could demonstrate that leadership but frankly he looks just as lost as his players. Besides, it's not as if the players even look like their craving leadership. What they look like most, at least the ones who are suiting up, are a collection of NBA bit players trying half-heartedly to keep their skills from dulling too much before they move on to a real team as a bit part in that team's run up to the playoffs.

There was a column in Tuesday's Plain Dealer that suggested that a Cavs rebuild is at least 10 years in the making, if teams like Chicago are any indication. Without any sort of superstar to fill their void, the Bulls post-Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen were the same sort of directionless mass.

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Some of that was due to the team never being truly bad enough for long enough to stockpile lottery picks. The other part of it though was due to a front office that seemed paralyzed about what direction to take. Maybe that's the natural course of things when you've had the greatest basketball player in the history of the game suiting it up for you every night.

Right now a 10-year turnaround for the Cavs seems wildly optimistic and that's why it falls to Gilbert to explain why that won't be the case. Gilbert may not realize it. He may be preoccupied with casino gambling. He may think that if he could endure the mortgage meltdown over the last few years he can endure anything. Well, welcome to Cleveland, pal. There is a malaise enshrouding this franchise and it is taking hold like a toxic mold in the basement, creeping up the walls. Cavs fans have been down this road. They know the way in their sleep.

Putting better players on the court right now isn't going to be possible. The NBA operates under a salary structure of loosey goosey rules and exceptions that no one much understands except that the only thing really worth knowing is that teams with superstars end up being able to exploit the rules in ways that defy reason or logic while the also rans are left hamstrung by the process.

And while that will help explain the dismal product on the court at the moment, what it doesn't explain at all is why the Cavs seem like a franchise lying back and taking it as if they have no other choice.

Every franchise is going to go through rough patches, although in Cleveland rough patches is the standard while stretches of success are the exception. The franchises that survive best are those that find ways to engage the fans as they work diligently behind the scenes to fix the problem.

I used to think of Gilbert as being that guy. I couldn't fathom a scenario where he'd allow this asset to wallow. Instead he's become the Dolans and Randy Lerner but with a twitter account.

For the life of me I can't figure out why anyone these days would attend a Cavs game, even the ones that Gilbert cajoled into paying for season tickets before they knew that James would skip

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town. The games aren't even competitive. The only selling point, really, is that they're over quickly.

Next season, though, will be even worse. The season ticket base will dwindle to nothing and it wouldn't surprise if the Cavs take to using curtains to shrink the size of the Q in order to make it look more crowded.

It doesn't necessarily have to be this way but Gilbert's lack of action and attention are going to have devastating consequences to this franchise unless he wakes up. There are probably worse head coaches he could have selected than Scott but it's hard to imagine he could have picked a worse public communicator than Scott. Rarely engaging, he's vacillates between testy and aloof. General manager Chris Grant executes his position as if he still thinks he's just the assistant. Maybe he is.

That leaves it in Gilbert's lap to be the face of the franchise. Instead, Gilbert has mostly disappeared from the scene and left the team and its fans to struggle to identify why exactly anyone at the moment should care. Not surprisingly, they've both groups have come to the same conclusion; nobody does, so why should they?