

## The Way the Stern Wind Blows

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, February 01 2011 1:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, February 03 2011 9:44 AM

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The Cleveland Cavaliers continue to reach lower and lower lows and yet everyone associated with it, players, management, fans, are all collectively Charlie Sheen: unable to admit that there is no place left to go because rock bottom has long since been reached.

But even if they could, it probably wouldn't matter anyway. Whereas knowing when you've bottomed out with the bottle may be the first step toward recovering, knowing when you've bottomed out in the NBA is irrelevant. The deck is stacked against you institutionally and short of a fortuitous ping pong ball or a warm weather climate with a vibrant night life, NBA riches will remain elusive.

The Cavs may not win again this season and that's the least snarky comment that can be made about this team right now. This team had its courage, its will, its fight removed a few months back when LeBron James visited the Q and took with him all that remained of the Cavs team he once helped take to the NBA finals.

But even without that dispiriting loss, the only place the Cavs were going was to the lottery anyway. What then to do with the rest of the basketball season? Is it time for an insurrection? Is it time to reconsider our thoughts on the relatively bankrupt operations that the Browns and the Indians have become in light of how the Cavs are operating at the moment? Or should we just do what we do in Cleveland and bend over, take another swat to the ass from Niedermeyer and then say "thank you, sir, may have another?"

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Honestly, is there really anything else to do? If we want to go down the usual Elisabeth Kubler-Ross steps of the grieving process, we're long past denial. The franchise as fans knew it from the last 7 years is indeed dead. Dozens of mind-numbing double digit losses this season have driven that point home.

That takes us to the blame portion of the program. But where to start or, more appropriately, where to focus? There's no real reason to blame Silent Dan Gilbert, the Cavaliers owner, who mostly expresses his thoughts these days in 140 characters or less via Twitter. Gilbert understandably went all in on James so it's not a surprise the Cavs would have regressed. You play no-limit Texas Hold 'Em and put everything at stake hoping to draw to an inside straight, it's going to cost you more times than not. Casinos are built on suckers who play those odds.

Besides, Gilbert's sin at the moment stems from his lack of leadership during the biggest crisis facing the franchise, not the fact that he made the bet that everyone asked him to make. Move on.

There's also no real reason to blame head coach Byron Scott, although he's been nothing short of a disaster as a head coach. His coaching is random. He admitted to testing his players during a crucial moment in a recent game the Cavs were competitive in late with a play they hadn't run since training camp. No one knew what the heck he was talking about. Not surprisingly, that infuriated the mercurial Scott without him ever realizing how bizarre his rant actually made him sound.

Still, Phil Jackson couldn't make this Cavs team competitive apparently, not with all the middling talent on this roster. Injured or healthy, nothing much would change its fortunes in the short term. Again, move on.

If we're going to stay mired in the blame game for now then let's be fair and honest about where it really lies and that's with the NBA and its benevolent dictator David Stern. It's not that Stern let James pull the rug out from under the Cavs feet that's the problem. He couldn't have stopped it because it was already too late anyway. Rather the crux of the issue is that Stern, for all his grand visions for the future and the brand, couldn't see the problems staring him in the face before it came to fruition to the detriment of Cleveland.

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If there is one truism in running a for-profit enterprise it is this: you can never get yourself in a position where the inmates run the asylum. Any business of any sort that gets itself in a position where an individual's presence or absence can send it into complete irrelevance overnight usually gets what it deserves in the end.

Scour the NBA at the moment and it's very clear that Stern's vision of the game has put the league in a position where the value of a franchise can plummet faster than the stock market after a terrorist attack. It's really rather simple. The owners are the pawns and the players control all. It's a Through-the Looking-Glass existence that puts the power in the hands of players (and their agents) to manipulate the lengths of their contracts in order to expire together at more desirable locations where the weather suits their fancy. You wouldn't run the local deli this way but the NBA has allowed itself to turn basic business principles on its ear so that James, Wades and Boshes of the world can hold a franchise hostage as each of them did with their teams this summer and as Carmelo Anthony and Dwight Howard are doing now.

It's the byproduct, really, of Stern's view that the league prospers best when it has superstars to market. Perhaps it does if the goal is to sell jerseys to the Chinese, but as it's playing out in real time it's probably the worst business plan imaginable.

Maybe it's fun to see billionaire owners squirm like pre-school girls eyeing a dead bird on the playground, but the reality is that by catering more to the egos of the superstars the NBA and Stern have left the owners, you know, the guys footing all the bills, holding the bag when those player egos naturally grow out of control.

The Cavs are a franchise that despite Gilbert's hubris are not going to recover from this for years and then only when a superstar happens to fall into their laps again through the luck of the ping pong balls. How is Minnesota doing these days without Kevin Garnett? How about Indiana since the departure of Reggie Miller? How about Milwaukee, since, well, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar left? You get the point.

When the superstar escapes by whatever means from the team that was lucky enough to be in a position to draft him, the franchise just doesn't recover until the next superstar comes along. It really is that simple.

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Cleveland, if you want your future, it's already been played out, a short plane ride away, in Chicago. In the 1997-98 season, the Chicago Bulls won 62 games and a NBA title. It was also Michael Jordan's and Scottie Pippen's last season with the team. It took the Bulls nearly four full seasons to win 62 more games total. They didn't have a winning record until 7 years after Jordan left. In the 6 seasons after that they had only two winning seasons and three seasons where they finished a .500. Only since Derek Rose fell in their laps have the Bulls had a chance to start climbing from the abyss. Gee, it only took 12 years for that to happen.

If David Stern doesn't see this as the issue holding back the NBA and make it the centerpiece of their upcoming negotiations, then he is in far deeper denial than is Gilbert about what it will take to rebuild the Cavs. Right now the players and the agents have pushed the league into a system that is working counter to the greater good of the league in favor of the greater good of a handful of players and a handful of franchises.

Either Stern takes this issue on now or abdicates it forever. It starts with a hard salary cap and a NFL-like way to put tags on certain players in order to keep them with their current teams. It ends with the notion that overnight no franchise can see its value plunge 35%, like the Cavs this season, just because one player leaves town. If that scenario remains viable, less and less owners will be willing to lay their money down.

To this point there hasn't been much talk either way on what Stern really thinks. But if you're watching in Cleveland, just know that the difference between losing for the next generation or so depends on which way the Stern wind decides to blow.