

The Price Is Still Right

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

Tuesday, February 15 2011 11:30 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, February 15 2011 10:40 AM



In this time of year in which we commemorate the birthdays of two of the greatest men in American history with a three-day weekend and countless furniture and electronics sales, I'd like to acknowledge the birth of another great American hero who had about as much influence on my life as George and Abe had on this great nation.

This week, Mark Price turns 47.

But before we talk about Mr. Price, let's quickly talk basic cable, Converse shoes, and men's hairstyles.

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It all started in the sunshiny spring of 1988. Now finally equipped with cable just like everybody else who was cool in the fifth grade, I was introduced to a veritable galaxy of entertainment options: a smorgasbord of 36 channels to choose from all thanks to that goofy lethal-injection box atop our console television.

Of all the channels we got that would rewrite television history, the one that plays a role in this story was probably the least impressive of the bunch. Come to think of it, it still probably holds that title. Everything that happened next was a direct result of TBS.

Back in the days before ESPN was the Ho Chi Minh of sports, TBS was the sole cable provider of the NBA. What was weird about it was that at this time TBS still considered itself "Atlanta's Superstation." It would carry its fair share of Hawks games, but would also throw in a handful of games between other teams. But when the playoffs began, TBS held no allegiance to any teams.

In that spring of '88, right around the time all the boys in my class were taken to another classroom to talk about how the knobs in our pants would eventually take over and emotionally dictate our lives while the girls talked about things that even today I don't want to know about, TBS televised essentially every NBA playoff game. And for the first time since I became aware of their existence, the Cavs were a part of it.

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I'd never actually seen a Cavs game before that spring. My dad and I turned on their first playoff game with Chicago to watch as a novelty, as we would when ESPN started televising arena football games that summer. It was kind of like basketball, though not really when you came right down to it, but was still kind of fun.

As the Cavs dropped the first two games of the best-of-five first-round series and came back home to Richfield – *And just where the hell is Richfield?*, I wondered – I had become enchanted with the littlest man on the floor.

Here was this tiny white dude zipping all over the place, blowing past his defenders and drilling these long, arching jump shots.

I suppose I first liked him because I saw myself in him – or rather because I saw what I wanted to be in him. I'd been a pretty good basketball player on my fourth- and fifth-grade teams, particularly when I'd launch one of my patented twelve-foot bombs cued up using both hands or fly into the lane and chuck the ball up toward the eight-foot rim before crashing into that padded thing on the wall underneath the backboard.

He had perfectly combed hair – back and to the right – that looked like it belonged to one of those guys in the hardbound books you'd find in the barber shop. And perhaps best of all, in an

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era when Nike “Air Jordans” were just starting to soar in popularity, this guy wore understated, affordable Converse.

It didn't take long for me to learn his name. It was Mark Price.

And thus began a six-year fascination. If it didn't mold me into the type of person I would be, it certainly dictated what kind of basketball player I'd become.

Though the Cavs lost that series to Chicago in 1988 (blowing an 18-point lead in the deciding Game Five – an early “Get Out While You Still Can” note from the gods), I was now completely enamored with this Price character, and to a lesser extent, the Cavs themselves. And then when they burst out of mediocrity the following season, Mark Price and the Cavs became a real thing in my life. They were often featured on CBS on Sunday afternoons and would beat the living crap out of anybody who stood in their way. And leading the charge was little Mark Price.

While I liked watching him shoot and loved the way he made all his free throws (most of them with that crisp, wood-splitting sound the net made as the ball glided through), it wasn't until the following spring that I realized just how important he was to the franchise.

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Matched again with Chicago in the first round of the playoffs, a team they'd beat all six times they'd played during the regular season, the Cavs appeared certain to cruise into the conference semifinals, even when it was announced that Price would miss the first game of the series with a pulled hamstring. It didn't matter, I figured. Not only were the Cavs a much better team, but they were all but unbeatable at home, where they'd gone 37-4 that season.

But with Price on the bench that Friday night, the Cavs lost by seven, and the tone was set for the series that would ultimately define the franchise. He came back and fought through the pain to help the Cavs win two of the next three to force a Game Five, then courageously scored 24 points in the deciding game (which ended when somebody for Chicago – I can't remember who just now – made a shot at the buzzer). The Cavs' days as a powerhouse were postponed.

Ironically, just as the Cavs' star began to fall, my appreciation for Mr. Price began to rise. As they slogged through their Ron Harper-less, injury-laden 1989-90 season, I began my junior high school basketball career. I can still remember the day we got our uniforms (hand-me-downs from the high school and JV teams in the '70s, I think). While my teammates fought over No. 23, I insisted on No. 25. And since only the road uniforms had a No. 25, I was forced to improvise for my home jersey – seeing backward significance in No. 52. All that season I felt I was a better road player.

From that point forward, whenever I had a basketball in my hand, I always saw myself as Mark Price and naturally assumed others did, too. In retrospect, I suppose there wasn't that much in common between a four-time NBA All-Star bound to have his jersey retired and a 13-year-old kid built like an anorexic scarecrow with a mouthful of braces and raging pimples all over his face. But dammit, my hair looked just like his.

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On that fateful Saturday afternoon when I banked a 30-foot shot off the glass and into the hoop at the buzzer at Xenia Central, I knew exactly how Mark felt when he drilled a three-pointer to clinch a victory in the waning seconds at the Coliseum. Granted, my bucket did nothing more than turn a 27-point loss into a 24-point loss, but still, I knew Mark would have been proud.



By the end of that season, Mark Price was my guy. I had a couple Price t-shirts, my room was covered in Price posters – including my favorite: Price all alone on the free throw line releasing a foul shot with :02 on the clock. When his Christian singing group Mark Price and Lifeline came out with its generation-defining album, “Stand Steadfast,” I got a copy as fast as I could and tried like hell to like Contemporary Christian. And while “He’s Alive” was an upbeat little ditty and “Where Can I Go” had a subtle Barry Manilow-tone to it, I just couldn’t do it. But I still have that tape.

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I collected his basketball cards. I'd watch and re-watch games I'd recorded on VHS during the season, picking up his mannerisms and trying to learn his tricks. I'd spent my summers in the driveway shooting free throws using the style I'd copied from Mark: position your right foot just ahead of your left, spin the ball casually in your hands, take two dribbles, bend your knees just so, bounce up on your calves, and release. *Splash.* (Or *Clank!* and *Oh shit, the ball's in the street again and here comes the UPS truck!*)

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My adoration took an admittedly bizarre turn when I named a pet after him (can't really believe I'm telling you this). Over the next few months, Mark the Hamster and I became quite close before he died unexpectedly of an apparent drug overdose that fall.

If the dead rat wasn't enough of an omen, I hadn't seen anything yet. Though it's now more than two decades behind me, I'll never forget November 30, 1990 – a day that stands out like the Kennedy Assassination of my puberty. On that Friday afternoon, walking a vivacious young girl to the bus, I officially began my first true relationship – the moment I'd been anticipating for years (or at least eight or nine months).

That night, going for a loose ball, Mark Price collided with the scorer's table at the Omni in Atlanta, blew out his ACL, and was done for the rest of the year.

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I should have realized then, as I do now with my bad-omen skills finely honed, that the relationship with School Bus Girl – and perhaps all that followed – was doomed. I take my first tentative, eager yet innocent steps into romance and within a matter of hours, my athletic idol is smote down. And sure enough, after a long, rocky winter, School Bus Girl finally left me for another man, presumably because he had a better 10-speed.

Meanwhile, back in Cavs-Land, if there was any doubt as to Mark Price's importance to the franchise, it vanished over the rest of that season. Though every other key component of the roster remained intact, the Cavs went from a perennial playoff contender to an embarrassment with the popping of one golden ligament.

They'd stood at 9-7 the night Price went down and slosed to a 24-42 record over the remainder of the season. It was the beginning of an incredible trend: over the next four years, when Mark Price played, the Cavs held a record of 199-113: a .638 winning percentage, or the equivalent of a 52-win season. When he didn't, they were 34-64, a winning percentage of .347 – the equivalent of a 52-loss season.

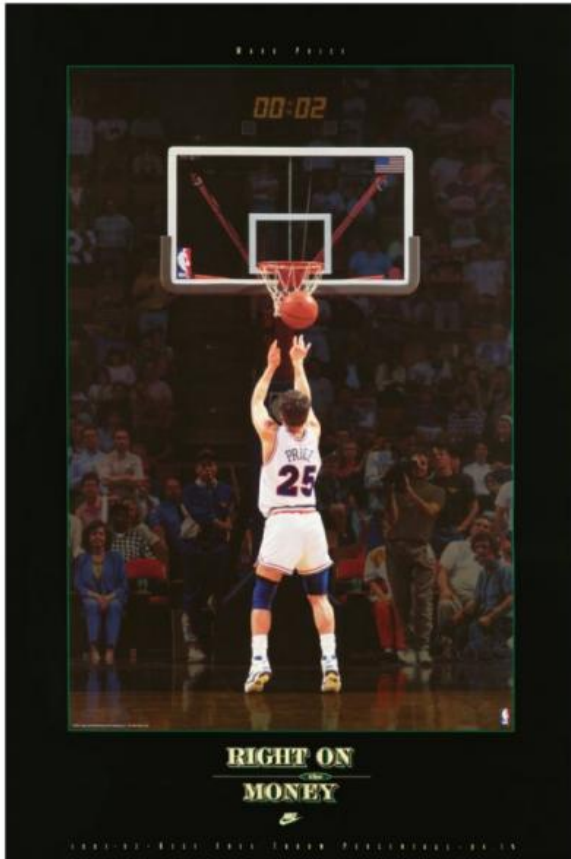
You'd expect numbers like that for the Bulls without Michael Jordan or the Cavs of the last decade without Captain Elbow. They were, much as it pains me to admit, dominant players bound for the Hall of Fame. They were huge, sleek, and muscular and could do whatever they damn well pleased on the basketball floor.

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Mark Price was a tiny white kid from Enid, Oklahoma. He sang to Christian music. He was six foot tall standing on a Bible. And he behaved exactly the way he looked.



In fact, his pure reputation probably led to his comical sole ejection from an NBA game. Upset with a call during a game in Chicago quickly becoming a blowout, Price bounced the ball hard on the court in frustration. He was teed up. When he commented, “That’s bull,” he was run out of the building. Apparently his own mother was part of the officiating crew that night.

Of course Mark Price had talent and all of that, but players like him didn’t – and don’t – carry NBA teams.

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Yet through the early 1990s, that's precisely what he did. And it made him arguably the most valuable player in Cavaliers history – yes, even more so than You Know Who – simply because serving as the heart and soul of a franchise was not what Price was built for and, some would argue, beyond what he was actually capable of.

Mark Price was like that goofy No. 5 robot in the strangely unforgettable 1986 film *Short Circuit*. Once No. 5 was struck by lightning and “came to life,” something happened that was impossible to explain, comprehend, or duplicate. That's precisely what happened with Mark Price and the Cavaliers.

It was further illustrated when he returned from the knee injury the following November, two months ahead of schedule. The Cavs had started the 1991-92 season 1-4 without him, then went 56-21 after he came back.

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