

Dead End Just Ahead

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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It came in the form of "breaking news" from the Cleveland Cavaliers management. The Cavs acquired Baron Davis and a 2011 1st round pick in a trade with the Los Angeles Clippers. There was no mention of which part or parts of the Cavs' leaky ship were being discarded for Davis, but it didn't matter.

Then came the next text where the Cavs acquired two "projects" from the Celtics in exchange for a relatively meaningless second round pick.

All this was followed up by the inevitable press conference by Cavs general manager Chris Grant where he explained the thinking, acted as if these latest deals substantially move the franchise forward, and then praised owner Dan Gilbert's commitment to winning.

I've seen World B. Free play on bad Cavs teams so excuse me if it's hard to get too excited by the acquisition of an aging but talented point guard with an attitude problem.

If these moves were supposed to engender excitement among the fans, they failed miserably. At best it gets a raised eyebrow and nothing more. Even with the first round pick and the fact that Davis gets to stay in Cleveland for another year at least and bitch and moan about it in the process, the Cavs aren't incrementally closer to contending for a title now than they were on

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Monday.

It's not even that I'm down on Cavaliers management in the sense that I feel like they'll follow the Cleveland sports trend of squandering high draft picks. It's just that despite all logic, the NBA remains the most difficult professional sport in which to rebuild into a contender. The statistics on this point are overwhelming.

Let's face it. The only reason the Cavaliers even came close to sniffing a NBA title the last few years was that it had the league's best player on its team. He's gone and he's never coming back. And unless and until the next LeBron James lands in Cleveland by dumb luck, the Cavaliers don't have much of a chance to sniffing a title again.

I'd say the NBA is at a crossroads but that was actually several years ago when that crossroad was in front of them and David Stern and the owners walked down exactly the wrong path toward what is surely a dead end.

The NBA is a broken league and there are a myriad of factors why, from a bizarre and hole-ridden salary cap, to a playoff system that is too expansive, to a collective bargaining agreement that is completely indifferent to the so-called small market teams.

I've gone through this several times now and won't turn over the same shovels of dirt once again. But give me a team outside of the gilded few and I'll show you a team that is no closer to winning a NBA title today than it was a decade ago and the culprit won't be as much franchise mismanagement as it is institutional failures.

With the NBA's trading deadline having passed, the only thing of note to be gleaned is that there are now 4 cities that have been sold out by the outsized wants of superstar players who think they invented the game. Toronto lost Chris Bosh, although I still am four square in the camp that Bosh is about the 138th best player in the league. Days later the Cavs lost James. Denver was forced to trade Carmelo Anthony because Denver is too confining to his New York City state of mind and on the heels of that trade came Utah's trade of Deron Williams. And I really don't care if the Kremlin owns the Nets. If Williams doesn't find New Jersey to his liking, and he won't, no worries. He's a free agent after next season and he'll find his way to the Knicks. Count on it.

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Next up, of course, is Chris Paul. He'll leave New Orleans and find himself probably in New York as well so that the Knicks will have their own trio of semi-superstars to counteract the Miami Heat and their like-minded trio.

If the NBA is starting to look like a game of Risk it's because that's exactly what it's become. Territories are being conquered, the number of continents is shrinking and soon the game will be dominated by two or three players on the verge of world domination.

The irony, of course, is that as the NBA's reach effectively shrinks, the accomplishments of the remaining few legitimate teams become cheaper. Where's the sport in the same few power teams buzzing through the regular season against permanently weakened franchises and then passing around among them the Davey O'Brien trophy every year?

Some might argue that Kevin Garnett started the trend when he escaped a frustrating situation in Minnesota. But Garnett's escape was as much about the franchise wanting to repay Garnett for his 12 previous seasons of dedication than it was Garnett forcing management to accommodate his desire to go somewhere else where the winning would be easier.

Still, the Garnett situation may have set the table for what came next. It's certainly not beyond the pale that James completely misread Garnett's situation in Minnesota, projected it upon himself in Cleveland, and decided to move while still on the front end of his prime years rather than on the back end.

But that's probably giving James too much credit. So much of what he did, from tanking the series against the Celtics to the process he went through last summer that was a fraud to the self-aggrandizing show he put on with the aid of a corrupt sports network, all seemed designed as part of an exit strategy formed years ago to better rig his own chances at becoming the transcendent sports figure he sees himself as.

It may still work out for James but his legacy will always be tarnished. Still, you can't dismiss the impact it had on players like Chris Paul, Deron Williams and Carmelo Anthony, to name just a few. For reasons that still mystify, they look to someone like James as a leader despite all the

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evidence that all he'll ever be capable of is being Ed McMahon to someone else's Johnny Carson.

If you think these latest moves are a blip, then you haven't been paying attention. The inmates are running the asylum and getting the keys back from their greedy little hands isn't going to be easy.

Stepping back a moment from the shit storm that is the NBA at the moment to ponder the much bigger picture, it occurs to me that the NBA is actually in far worse shape than major league baseball, the other poster child for institutional messes.

Since 2000, 16 different teams have been in the World Series while only 10 different teams have been in the NBA Finals. If things continue on as they are in the NBA, 10 years from now you'll be able to look back and there may have been only 4 or 5 different teams in the NBA Finals.

If that's progress, then it would be fascinating to understand what the powers to be believe problems look like.

Baron Davis may work out just fine for the Cavs and the two projects they inherited from Boston may be serviceable players. But the best case scenario, without a fundamental shift in the business model of the NBA, is that all these players plus the two first round picks next year will make the Cavs just good enough to stay in NBA purgatory.