

Always a Follower, Never a Leader

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The reactions to the Dallas Mavericks winning the NBA Championship, or more likely, the Miami Heat not winning the NBA Championship, are about as expected. You can't just take a dump on an entire city and its fan base the way LeBron James did on Cleveland and not expect a little backlash.

And for however thoughtful James can appear to be at times, he does have a tendency to become his own worst enemy at just the wrong time, which only feeds the beasts. His press conference afterward was classic James: poorly masked irritation mixed with a healthy disrespect for anyone who doesn't agree with him and wrapped in a giant tortilla of egomania.

It's true as James said that once those people who feel good about James losing will eventually have to return to their own lives filled with their own problems while James goes off and lives what he views as a better life. But it's the underlying premise of it all that eventually will come back to teach him another hard lesson.

James didn't have the best upbringing and the remnants of it are still ever present. He had no father and his mother had her own problems to deal with. He floated from family to family just looking to belong. He often found himself around people with money but had none himself.

So it doesn't surprise that so much of how James measure himself against others is on a

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material scale. He lives in a house in Bath Township that is more on the scale of a hotel than on the scale of the 3,500 square foot houses that surround it. He has a collection of cars he garages separately. He's got every material good his little heart always wanted but couldn't afford. He jets around the world, has countless other celebrities as friends and his occupation amounts to shooting a ball into a hoop.

But the suggestion that an abundance of material goods is the only path to happiness is too ridiculous to spend much time debating. I suspect that even James would admit to being content for long stretches of time earlier in life when money wasn't ever present.

And even if that weren't ever true for James, it is true for many, many others. People have a way of making the best of almost any situation.

It's not like James' life is unencumbered, no matter what he'd have you believe. Generally speaking, the more overhead you take on the more problems you take on as well.

It also can't be any fun to constantly deal with your own mother and her predilection for public flameouts. As his celebrity grows his circle of true friends probably shrinks. There's always someone looking for a piece of him, from every worthy charity you could think of to every acquaintance he's ever made who's now down on his luck.

And then there is the abject failure he's had as a professional to reach the only goal that really matters: championships. Division titles are nice. So too are MVP trophies. But until he wins a title, he's Charles Barkley.

As much fun as it is to celebrate James' comeuppance for the way he handled the business side of his basketball life, there is a larger point that is being missed and that goes back to that same upbringing. The story as written is that James failed because he once again couldn't lead a stacked Heat team to the championship. The story that doesn't get written enough is that James is never going to lead any team to a championship because he's not a leader in the first place. He's the most talented follower professional sports has ever seen.

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Much has been made about James' fourth quarter failures in the Mavericks series and indeed in the larger sense James did consistently come up short in that regard. He had a total of 18 fourth quarter points in 6 games and according to the Elias Sports Bureau had the biggest single drop off between regular season scoring average and finals scoring average in NBA history.

Surely much of this should properly be attributed to the Mavericks' defense and James gave them the proper respect. But if you were looking for anything more from James as to why he wasn't able to help his team more, he wasn't offering. Where once all he wanted was just to belong he now lacks the self-awareness to recognize that he's still on that same search.

Instead, he bristled at any questions about his performance, particularly in those crucial fourth quarters, by suggesting that his other contributions, such as his defense, were being overlooked. It's akin to the argument that right now Indians fans shouldn't focus on Shin-Soo Choo's lack of offense because he's still a fine defensive player.

But Pat Riley didn't make a mockery of the NBA's free agency system just so he could get James to play really nice defense while another team, this time the Mavs, won the championship. He bought and paid for James because he damn well expected James to live up to his 30 ppg average and then some when it was really needed, like games 4, 5 and 6 against those Mavs.

Ah but what Riley and everyone else puzzled by James' passiveness continues to overlook is that they can pay James a king's ransom for now and evermore but that isn't going to fundamentally change his make up. James is passive and deferential. He doesn't possess the single-mindedness of purpose that Michael Jordan did. James has always just wanted to fit in while someone else drives the car.

James was always the best pure player on any team he was on, from CYO through high school and now as a professional. But until he came to the Cavs, James was never the leader of any of those teams nor was he asked to be. Ultimately, he left Cleveland not because the Cavaliers could never surround James with enough talent to compete for a championship but because in Cleveland the focus would always be on James.

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As much as people like to think of James as the center of his own universe, it's just not how James sees himself. He's the guy who'd really rather get the assists. If he were in a band, he'd be the drummer. Perhaps he'd be the greatest drummer in the world, but he was never looking to form his own band and insert himself as lead singer.

If James were truly the alpha male of the NBA and had all the leverage the most people attribute to him, then there is no way that a middling role player like Chris Bosh turns his back on him as he did in deciding to go to Miami instead of Cleveland.

Brian Windhorst, writing for ESPN, noted that while James asked both Bosh and Wade to join him in Cleveland, neither player ever gave it any real consideration. Wade flirted with Chicago but wanted to stay in Miami. Bosh told James he was headed to Miami as well. Ultimately, it wasn't James who made The Decision at all. It was made for him by much stronger and forceful personalities. It was made by Wade and Bosh.

In that context, all of what happened with James in the Boston series last season or what happened to James against the Mavs this season makes perfect sense. It's convenient to think that James quit but in reality he just lived up to his instincts to play second fiddle and wilted when the spotlight was turned on him alone.

His teammates and his new transient fans in Miami may have expected more but as they will eventually discover, just like his teammates and fans in Cleveland discovered, James gave them all he could.