

## The Audacity Of Hope

Written by {ga=gdbenz}  
Friday, May 09 2008 7:00 PM -

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When things are going well, you never expect it to last, especially in Cleveland. When things are going poorly, you never think it will end, especially in Cleveland. In Gary's latest, he examines the offensive woes of the Indians and the Cavaliers and the cynical nature of Cleveland fans as we watch the teams we love endure these struggles.



When things are going well, you never expect it to last, especially in Cleveland. When things are going poorly, you never think it will end, especially in Cleveland.

Witnessing the remarkably similar trajectories of the Cavs and the Indians lately it seems like each team is stuck in an endless loop of missed layups and strike outs. The only reason to keep watching is because, like pounding your head against the wall, it feels so good when you stop. That's what happens I guess when you have a supposedly playoff caliber baseball team playing sub .500 ball because it can't hit and a playoff basketball team in danger of being swept because it likewise can't hit.

To appreciate the depths of the Indians offensive struggles, just know that David Dellucci is now batting third. To appreciate the depths of the Cavaliers struggles, just know that the only person shooting worse against the Celtics than LeBron James is Anderson Varejao.

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It would be nice to think that this is just a rough patch that will straighten itself out. To be sure, for every valley comes a peak. But if that's the only lesson to be learned from this stretch, then the disappointment is bound to linger. The parallel struggles of these Cleveland teams are as revealing of their fundamental flaws as they are frustrating.

For the Cavs, James may have picked a vastly inappropriate moment to suddenly go cold, but he hasn't suddenly turned into the basketball version of Travis Hafner. He'll be fine. You know it, he knows it and the Celtics know it, too. The only real question is whether it's in time to salvage the series. If not, then undoubtedly it will be in time for the Summer Olympics in Beijing. But even as James will come out of it, that doesn't mean that the Cavs will suddenly emerge as a serious NBA title threat. There still remains the matter of the relative merits of head coach Mike Brown.

You know that a theory has entered the mainstream when the guy in your office that still plays way too much Dungeons and Dragons is now talking about the Cavs' offensive schemes under Brown. In the past week or so, people who couldn't tell the difference between Delonte West and Jerry West are suddenly insisting that the extent of Brown's knowledge about offense begins and ends with giving James the ball and telling him to make something happen.

Actually, that isn't far off. Too often it looks like the only reason that anyone other than James scores is because James is an unselfish player with an amazing basketball I.Q. and an uncanny ability to find the open man he can't even see. If James were like Gilbert Arenas, no one else on the team would average more than six points.

Brown unquestionably thinks defense first and that emphasis has actually paid off in much more tangible ways than many fans think. The Cavs in general and

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James in particular are far better defensively as a result of Brown and it is this ability that has helped carry the Cavs through what otherwise would be fairly lean times, particularly this season.

But the truth about the Cavs is that they are still a talented but flawed team with a decent but flawed coach. Whenever this season ends, and it looks like that might be sometime mid next week, Brown will undoubtedly have his state of the team press conference where in sum he'll conclude that this team will be far better next year once it has a full preseason to work together.

He'll be right, but if the introspection stops there, look for early playoff exits around this time each year Brown remains in charge. Whatever work remains to be done on the player acquisition front, and there is some, at least as much work remains on offense irrespective of the players. Brown's simplistic offensive schemes are like that boat that's been sitting on blocks in the neighbor's driveway for the last six years. Both need to be junked. The statute of limitations has long since expired on an offense that begins and ends with James holding the ball at the top of the key playing one on one with the defender.

Playing good defense in basketball is every bit the table stake that having good pitching is in baseball. But it's not the only variable in the equation. Without some semblance of an offense, you end up with, well, the Indians. Like the Cavs, the Indians good defense is in the form of its top-tier pitching. But offensively, only a division-wide funk is keeping them in the hunt. If any of the White Sox, the Tigers or the Twins gets hot, the Indians will be looking up at a double-digit deficit long before the All Star break comes around.

Just as the Cavs problems of late are causing many to question Brown's ability, the Indians struggles likewise has many wondering about manager Eric Wedge. The difference, though, is that there really isn't much Wedge can do other than

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what he has been doing to get the team going offensively. It's not as if there are new plays to design. Unless general manager Mark Shapiro finds a different mix of players, Wedge has nothing much else to do but juggle the lineup, start runners to avoid the double play and give up outs trying to sacrifice runners over into scoring position.

The truth about the Indians is that they, too, are a talented but flawed team. Indians fans remember the bashers of the late 1990s and assume that this team is similarly configured. But go up and down the lineup and the only way you could reach that conclusion is by focusing more on potential than results.

Consider Grady Sizemore. He's young and appears to have a huge upside, but you also can't ignore that he's still a lifetime .280 hitter who's trending down not up. Last season, he walked more and hence improved his on-base percentage, but the only other offensive statistic that was better than the season before was RBI. He had two more in 2007 than 2006. Jhonny Peralta is in the same situation, except his descent is in its second season. The rest of the lineup, save for Victor Martinez and Hafner, falls into one of two categories: young and still establishing a baseline of performance or old and mediocre. Martinez is steady and seems like he'll always hit and Hafner, well, enough keystrokes have already been made describing his plight.

Maybe it hasn't yet been reached, but at some point potential has to actually translate into results or else Indians pitchers will continue to lead the league in tough-luck losses. It's no longer a question of waiting for 40 or 50 games to get in the books, it's a matter of actually looking at the last couple hundred games and facing reality.

That's actually the real problem and the real truth. Cleveland fans are among the most cynical and bitter anywhere in the country, but it is a veneer that goes only a quarter inch deep. At their core, they remain ever hopeful and purposely naive. Maybe it's the defense mechanism that's kept them sane these many

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years but unfortunately it can't change outcomes for the Cavs or the Indians. Like drug or alcohol addiction, the first step is for the fans and the teams to acknowledge the problem.