

Lingering Items - Wishful Thinking Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, May 30 2009 7:00 PM -

Well, you knew it wouldn't be long before the slew of "LeBron to New York" columns came out. And Gary starts this week's Lingering Items by looking at a column from this weekend's New York Post that is along those lines. Gary also hits on the financial problems of the English Premier Soccer League, and the effect it's having on Randy Lerner, who owns Aston Villa. Gary also touches on Eric Mangini's team building exercises, Josh Cribbs, and David Dellucci.



As the Cleveland Cavaliers were fighting for their playoff lives, there were and still are all sorts of theories about why they find themselves sitting and Orlando advancing and what it all means. They range from the sublime to the ridiculous, as expected. But for the truly bizarre, it would be hard to beat [the column by the New York Post's Marc Berman](#), a hack writer with enough pseudo New York arrogance to make his employer's proud.

In Berman's world, the Cavs loss to the Magic all but puts LeBron James in New York. The theory is that once James surveys the wreckage of a season shortened before its time, he'll understand that he was let down by a poor supporting cast that can't improve and turn his sights toward the Knicks and a supporting cast that can only improve with James in the lineup.

Apparently, the difference between the Knicks remaining the dregs of the NBA and being competitive in the NBA's eastern conference is James. Berman writes it as if it is a revelation. Put James on any team and they suddenly become competitive in the eastern conference. Like the E Street Band, James demonstrates night after night after night after night that he's the league's best player. Since he was 10 years old, James has made every team he's been on better.

Berman finishes it off by saying that the Cleveland/Orlando series and the Cavs' shortcomings that are being exposed is exactly the reason James would come to New York in 2010. What Berman doesn't answer, because he can't, is why James would want to put his fate in the hands of a moribund franchise run by fools. Cavs general manager Danny Ferry has proven to be an adept general manager. There are far more reasons to believe that Ferry can continue to effectively tinker with the Cavs roster until he gets it perfect than there are to believe that the Knicks could do likewise.

The NBA playoffs prove that while it may not take 12 guys to win the championship, it takes more than 5. The Knicks may have a player or two who would be useful in Cleveland, they don't have a roster full. If they did they'd already be competitive. They aren't. That's another way of saying that on a straight line basis, the Cavs current roster with James beats the Knicks current roster with James, night after night after night after night.

Column's like Berman's have become a fixture in the national media. The underlying premise is that for reasons not fully articulated, the city of New York provides a better launching pad for James' global empire. It's a theory that makes no sense.

James already is one of the richest and most recognizable athletes in the world. His latest exploits in the NBA will only add to those riches and recognition. He has an armful of national and international endorsements all from the humble environs of his Bath, Ohio home. He has more than enough celebrity friends

already to last him a lifetime. In short, there is nothing about playing in New York that can possibly make him any richer. The Knicks can't pay him as much as the Cavs. But more importantly, he hasn't missed out on any endorsement opportunities by playing in Cleveland. Those inclined to throw money at athletes to endorse products can just as easily find James in Cleveland as they can on the upper west side of Manhattan.

I can understand and appreciate the arrogance of New Yorkers. They live in one of the great cities in the world. But it isn't the only place that fame and fortune is made. Tiger Woods has done pretty well for himself while operating out of Orlando, Florida. Michael Jordan didn't need New York. Peyton Manning is doing pretty well for himself in Indianapolis. I don't recall Wayne Gretzky needing New York as his base.

In terms of gaining access to international markets, New York isn't the magic gateway. The billions to be made off the billions in China aren't tied to James being in any particular location. The NBA does a pretty good job exploiting its top talents and for as long as James continues to play in Cleveland, the Cavs will be a feature game beamed to foreign markets.

While caught up in their own arrogance, the New York media hasn't even bothered to consider James' perspective. He is a Midwestern kid with Midwestern values. He's notable for the incredible loyalty he shows to those with whom he's close, and that includes his hometown. He gets more than his share of time in the spotlight venues but he still has the relative quiet of his compound that he can return to without it ever turning into the circus that would become his potential new home in New York. The New York media may not believe it, but being hassled by paparazzi 24/7, which is what James would be exposed to in New York, is not an advantage.

James could very well jump from Cleveland, but it will never be about the money. He's got plenty of that. He wants to be the best to ever play the game and thus will put himself in the situation that best allows him to win championships.

Whatever else New York may be, it will never be that.

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Cleveland Browns owner Randy Lerner may come across as a disinterested and reluctant owner but maybe he's just distracted. A story in Thursday's Wall Street Journal shed some light on the England's Premier Soccer league and the truckload of financial problems it's having. Undoubtedly those troubles are having an impact on Lerner who owns the Aston Villa team in that league.

To American football fans who view team ownership through the prism of the NFL, the methods of the Premier League are an eye opener. For one, there are virtually no regulations on who can own a team nor are there any requirements that a new owner get the consent of the other owners in the league before acquiring his interest. That explains how Lerner acquired the Aston Villa team so easily and quickly. He bailed out the last owner that was swimming in debt.

But the far bigger problem for the league is the incredible debt undertaken by its teams. Unlike the NFL where owners can only leverage so much of their club through loans, English Premier League owners suffer under no such constraints. Not surprisingly, most of the playboy owners in that league are leveraged up to their eyeballs with other people's money. Combine that with a lack of salary cap, the ability to trade freely without league intervention and the unfettered ability to sign free agents and suddenly teams have a capital structure that they can't sustain during difficult economic times.

It's not known how Lerner financed his multi-multi-million dollar purchase of Aston Villa but it probably wasn't an all-cash deal. They rarely are. When he purchased the team in 2006, credit was easily obtainable. Whatever amount was financed it was done under the working assumption that revenues from the club would continue to climb and the economy would continue expand. As the Wall Street Journal details, that isn't the case these days in the English Premier League any

more than it is the case in the NFL.

None of this necessarily will have an impact on the Browns. But it is worth watching because of the whipsaw effect. If the economy doesn't improve, both the Browns and Aston Villa can end up with a once well-heeled owner suddenly strapped for cash and taking on water. That won't be good news for either franchise.

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So Browns rookies and their agents are upset that head coach Eric Mangini gave them a voluntary opportunity to ride in a bus with him 10 hours to Hartford, Connecticut for his football camp/vanity project. Sure, it may have been voluntary in the same way your company picnic is voluntary, but hey, we all have to do what we have to do.

The only thing that struck me about the whole story, and maybe it has something to do with the tough economy and its impact on Lerner, was the fact that they have to truck this team up to New England in a Greyhound. If my recollection is correct, and I believe it is, the Browns have their own private aircraft, thanks to Mr. Lerner. They use it to take the team to away games. It's kind of surprising it wasn't made available to the rookies who "volunteered" to help a brother out. Maybe the price of jet fuel is prohibitively high these days. Hard to say.

Even if the company plane wasn't available, Mangini surely is making enough to buy a few plane tickets for the help. He may be the head coach, but he apparently tosses around his own money like he's still the ball boy.

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The news that Josh Cribbs has essentially abandoned his holdout comes as no great surprise. Apparently Cribbs had a conversation with Mangini and whatever was said the message Cribbs received was that he'd be far better off getting his butt back on the field than in writing stream of conscious press releases about how he has to have a new contract now so that he'll make enough money to last him the rest of his life.

It was an interesting little showdown between Cribbs and Mangini and Cribbs certainly blinked first and quickly. But that's no reason to tweak Cribbs. As I said, it was an ill-conceived holdout orchestrated by a new agent who put his own interests ahead of the player he represented.

Cribbs doesn't need to holdout to get a new contract. My guess is that Mangini told him to produce this year, in front of the new regime, and those sorts of things will take care of themselves sooner rather than later. That's probably all Cribbs needed to hear anyway, especially since he is only two years into a multi-million dollar six-year contract.

Don't get me wrong. I still think the Browns have at least an ethical and probably a legal obligation to live up to the promises that former general manager Phil Savage reportedly made to Cribbs. Just because Savage isn't around now doesn't mean he wasn't authorized to make the promises then nor does it mean that the Browns can simply ignore them. But those kinds of battles are never good for the player to wage, even when he's right. In the end, he'll lose the war.

Still looming for Mangini is the continued holdout of kicker Phil Dawson. Unlike Cribbs, Dawson pretty much has said nothing about why he isn't around. He's letting his absence speak far more loudly. And while Dawson is certainly a valuable kicker, there are plenty of unemployed kickers available. None of them will be as good as Dawson, but the fact that they sit in the background is why a prolonged holdout by Dawson is unlikely. That situation will get resolved.

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In all this, including the field trip to Hartford, you have to give Mangini some credit. None of the players have a shadow of doubt who's in charge and they are snapping to accordingly. Of course, that goes for general manger George Kokinis as well, but that's another subject for another day.

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The Cleveland Indians finally parted ways with the most visible target of general manager Mark Shapiro's bargain basement free agent signings, David Dellucci. He won't be missed, but then again every team need's a goat. Thus this week's question to ponder: Who will fill that role for the Indians now that Dellucci is gone?