



What should I do? Should I remind you we've been through this before? ...Back in 1996, right around the same time Cavalier trendsetter John Crotty decided to take his talents (?) to South Beach and join the Miami Heat, Cleveland fans were dealt another blow with far more legitimate, present day implications. The city's most outstanding athlete-- a man with seven years of service to his team, six letters in his first name and five in his last—had traded his home whites for the black jersey of the enemy. Yes, we've had our share of Benedict Brutus Judases around here, but the heel turn and vitriolic return of Mr. Albert Jojuan Belle set the gold standard.

On November 19, 1996—just 46 days after smashing a walkoff grand slam off Armando Benitez in the ALDS (in notably the final postseason appearance of his career)—Albert Belle left Cleveland to ink a record-breaking 5-year, \$55 million deal with the rival Chicago White Sox. There was no self-fellating ESPN special, mind you (and Jon Hart did at least get a phone call), but over night, Cleveland's devotion to its troubled cleanup hitter was extinguished forever, replaced with maddening anticipation of the turncoat's eventual Jacobs Field homecoming.

It only seems appropriate then that Belle-- the notoriously even-tempered Dr. Phil of the sports world-- ambled out of his burrow this week to offer some pointed advice to a certain Akron-born

basketball player and the fans of Cleveland (whom Belle himself once famously referred to as "village idiots") regarding their Thursday night reunion special.

"My advice to LeBron is to take the high road and act professional," Belle, now 43, told the Plain Dealer. "I hope the fans do the same. I don't want them to embarrass themselves on TV. I'd like to see everybody hug and kiss before the game and then the fans can boo the heck out of LeBron during the game."

For now, let's ignore the fact that Belle marked his own return to the shores of Lake Erie in 1997 with some hateful barbs and a fine-incurring tossing of the bird. Truth is, nobody has come closer to experiencing the buzzsaw that awaits #6 on Thursday night than Albert. He was never as beloved as James (or Andre Thornton, for that matter), so his fall from grace was a far shorter one. But when Belle left town, it was the final gut punch in a 12-month span that had begun with glory (the Indians' first World Series appearance in 41 years) and ended with a displaced football team and a Tribe roster in sudden and complete transition. Knowing that former Browns owners would never show their face in town again, Albert Belle became the single focal point for a city's mounting, borderline maniacal frustrations.

And so, on June 3, 1997, a sold out crowd filed into the Jake to see the new-look, underachieving Cleveland Indians (27-25) take on their equally disappointing divisional foes, the Chicago White Sox (24-29). Yes, that's right, 42,000 people for a Tuesday night game in early June—and it wasn't even a bobblehead night! Of course, there was palpable excitement, nonetheless. Joey Belle was back in town, and the time had finally come for the Tribe faithful to voice their disapproval of #8's offseason "Decision."

In retrospect, Belle's betrayal ranks as a blip on the Richter scale compared to the atom bomb of LBJ's internationally televised scrotum kick. But while the wound may not have cut as deep, Albert's farewell act was no less hurtful, albeit for very different reasons. He may not have been our savior, but aligning yourself with Albert Belle required a defense attorney's level of commitment and self-deception. Every week, we'd have to construct another set of suitable rationales to explain our hero's actions. His recklessness, you see, was just a product of his admirable intensity. And those trick-or-treaters had it coming! And Fernando Vina should have gotten the hell out of the way! And everybody probably corks their bat, big deal!

While rooting for James was second nature, being an Albert Belle fan was hard work, and we would have liked to think he was appreciative of that.

He wasn't.

Imagine supporting your girlfriend through seven years of rehab only to have her dump you when she got a clean bill of health. That's kind of what the feeling was like on June 3, 1997. If LBJ was the homecoming queen that got away, AB was the mean, abusive punk rock chick that we thought we'd won over.

We were wrong.

Fortunately, the embittered natives didn't have to wait long to get their cowbells out during Belle's first night back. After Frank Thomas whiffed for the second out of the first inning, Belle stepped into the Jacobs Field batters box for the first time as a visiting player. The same fans who typically had greeted this man with chants of "MVP" and "Al-bert, Al-bert," now rained boos and "Jo-ey" jeers upon him. Belle, who was only hitting .274 coming into the game, seemed unfazed by the circumstances. His ritual was unchanged. Two practice swings, dig the heels in, a few balancing jukes with the bat, line up squared... and glare.

Some fans encouraged Indians starter Chad Ogea to send the traitor a message. But Ogea, who would wind up one out shy of being the likely World Series MVP later that year, challenged his former teammate instead. On the second pitch, Belle flew out to the Indians new centerfielder Marquis Grissom. The crowd erupted, and the taunts followed Belle back to the dugout and out to his station in left field, where rowdy fans on the porch once known as Albert's Alley started throwing fake cash and other potentially more dangerous objects down on the field. The game was delayed twice as the umpires, police, and cleanup crews scurried about to keep the peace. Belle, not surprisingly, seemed to be in his element— basking in the hatred and gesturing for the scorned masses to bring their worst.

If there's one thing that separates Belle from James more than anything, it's his reaction to criticism. While James has thrown on an "I'll show you" scowl on only rare occasions (Wizards fans have certainly seen it and suffered its wrath), Belle actually seemed to *require* negativity to reach his full potential. Fact is, the so-called King has had a highly marketable image and empire to protect his entire career, whereas Albert Belle never seemed to be particularly concerned with anything besides smashing the shit out of the baseball. That's why, even in the midst of what had to be a difficult, emotional day (he is human, after all), Belle rose to the

occasion.

After flying out to Grissom again in the 4th, Belle set about silencing the Cleveland crowd for good. In the fifth inning, with two on two out, he belted a towering three-run homer that chased Ogea and turned the atmosphere from riotous party to funeral procession in a matter of seconds-- stoically stutter-stepping into home plate for good measure. Two innings later, Belle followed a Thomas homerun with a double to right field, and he repeated the same feat in the 9th to finish the day 3-5 with 3 RBI.

The Indians lost the game 9-5, despite a pair of homeruns from the team's new undisputed Chosen One, Jim Thome. It would be nine years before The Thomenator would find himself in an eerily similar scenario; booed by the Cleveland faithful as a new member of the White Sox. But after witnessing Belle's performance on June 3, 1997, he already seemed to appreciate the magnitude of the man's effort.

"Out of anything you can say about the guy, he's a great player," Thome said after the game. "And I think he really loves the pressure. I really do."

Meanwhile, Chicago shortstop Ozzie Guillen, sounding very much like future manager Ozzie Guillen, found the crowd's reaction to Belle unforgivable.

"Look at how much good this guy brought to this town," he said. "And the people forget that because he wants to make his living? That's ignorant."

It's not hard to imagine Chris Bosh uttering the same words on Thursday night, presuming the evening goes as we imagine it will. The question is, will #6 be able to turn the crowd's fury back on them as Belle once did, or will he cower under the scrutiny, pressure, and emotion that comes with being a dethroned king?