

LeBron hourlong show brings end to free agent 'decision' circus

Even with six possible destinations that free agent LeBron James was purportedly "considering" as cities where to continue his NBA career, his self-aggrandizing ESPN special Thursday night proved to be the cherry on top, reaching new levels of how a player wrongly tabbed as the "King," allowed his individual "decision" to supercede all things NBA these last few weeks.

With such a nickname, it would be expected that James would be hands down considered the best player in the league, but with Kobe Bryant and his having won five titles, and hoisting the championship trophy the last two, the best one can say is that argument is up for debate.

While James had racked up individual accomplishments in Cleveland, though, he's yet to put his hand on the trophy, failing to make it to the finals the last two years, and swept out of the finals in his lone appearance three years ago.

Among the places on James' radar to potentially play beginning next season were Chicago, New York, Miami, New Jersey...even the Los Angeles Clippers.

Or staying in Cleveland.

Even with NBA rules that encourage players to not jump ship, to where the Cavaliers could have paid James \$30 million more than any of the other suitors, it would have been hard to digest James' embarrassing play against the Celtics this past postseason

and come away confident of a return.

That leaves the other five, who worked themselves into a lather to have enough cap room to sign James to a maximum deal, or at least close to one.

ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



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Therein lies an interesting conundrum. Just because the Cavs could have paid James more than the other franchises, doesn't mean the two sides couldn't have arrived at a contract to allow the Cavs to also add an impact player from this year's free agent class for another run at a title over the next few years.

Much like the Celtics decided to reup with Paul Pierce and Ray Allen, understanding how close they were to a title this past year, the Cavs weren't exactly eons from making a run at it themselves.

When looking at the five teams trying to snag James from Cleveland, it's rather easy to cross off the Clippers, knowing that James wasn't about to associate himself with such a cursed franchise for the long term.

If James wanted to take on a Herculean challenge, Clipper-land was certainly beckoning, but many a player has headed to that sad franchise, only to quickly discover that only miracles akin to turning water into wine might make the Clippers a .500 franchise.

Even New Jersey seemed viable early on, shortly after the Cavs' season ended, with new owner Russian billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov openly talking about buying up all the best talented players in the league — which he could, if not for that pesky thing called a salary cap. Even being friends with minority owner Jay-Z evidently did little to ramp up the Nets' chances at snagging LeBron.

Leading up to the "decision," it seemed clear that James was going to leave millions on the table to play somewhere other than Cleveland, and with LeBron as a brand thought to need a big market to grow even bigger in, it seemed natural that Chicago or New York would become his new home.

The Knicks had been preparing for this day for the last three years, to have enough cap room to bring on James and a second, or possibly a third star. In signing Amar'e Stoudemire to beef up their front court earlier in the week, it seemed to line up for that bigger shoe to drop.

That was not to be, in part because Knicks owner James Dolan made a horrible miscalculation in his effort to woo James —

dusting off Isiah Thomas. This was the same embarrassment, who as president was pushed out the door two years ago by the Knicks with an agreement preventing him from contacting Knicks players. With all other NBA teams scared at the prospect of hiring Thomas — from his numerous failings as an executive, his options were so limited he was left to coach Florida International University the last two years.

In Chicago, the picture was more promising, with the tantalizing prospects of playing with Carlos Boozer and Derrick Rose, but with the inevitable comparisons to Michael Jordan ready to weigh on James from day one, such a move seemed unlikely.

Then again, with the daunting Jordan statue right in front of the United Center, could James have asked the Bulls whether his comical possé could topple the Airness much like seven years ago in Iraq when Saddam's statue suffered a similar fate, but was refused?

As mad as Cleveland fans have a right to be following the announcement, letting off their frustration in a growing haze over the city from Cavalier jerseys burning en masse bearing his name, the ones who lost the most were his entourage groupies who had enjoyed power handed to them by Cavs management who bent over backwards to try to keep their star player happy.

Headed to Miami, the likes of 29-year-old Maverick Carter will have swallow hard at the reality that James will have to share the

spotlight with two other stars: Dwyane Wade, who has been in Miami for his each of his seven years and earned one ring, and Chris Bosh, another top free agent signee from Toronto, likely meaning that their power has likely disappeared.

Heat fans, though, were among the most excited at learning of James signing on, coming out in throngs to swarm the Heat Web site, buying up every last season ticket before the night was out.

So too did wrongfully hopeful Knick fans, who snapped up more than \$20 million in tickets, only to be let down hard by James' announcement.

For anyone in need of a game day ticket in New York, plenty of tickets outside Madison Square Garden should be available this season, as scalpers will more often than not look to shed their tickets for little or no profit.

While LeBron talked glowingly during his over-the-top ESPN charade about his wanting to play with Wade and Bosh in Miami, his decision to seek out a team loaded with talent will likely bog him down much like it once did Bryant, even after winning his first three titles, because each was with Shaquille O'Neal.

Once Bryant was able to earn a ring in 2009 without the help of O'Neal, though, the sting from O'Neal's laughable rap a year earlier: "Kobe, tell me how my a** tastes," was mostly lost.

When Celtics general manager Danny Ainge was able to bring Kevin Garnett and Allen into the

Celtics' fold three years ago, the two and Pierce were tagged with a familiar nickname from the 1980s when Larry Bird, Kevin McHale and Robert Parish were running the parquet floor in Boston: The Big Three.

Move the clock to the beginning of the 2010-11 season, and it's hard to picture that a younger trio of James, Wade and Bosh — at the primes of their career — won't rightfully take ownership of that title. As impressive the work done by Heat president Pat Riley to fit those three under the cap, his next challenge will be to fill out the remaining spots with complementary players, and not just bodies to occupy roster spots.

Riley worked some contractual magic this offseason by having Carlos Arroyo, Yakouba Diawara, Udonis Haslem, Jamaal Magliore, Shavlik Randolph, Quentin Richardson and Dorell Wright all come off the books at the same time. Prior to the signings of Wade, Bosh and James, or the drafting of three second round picks (each of whom will earn a non-guaranteed minimum) the Heat had on the books for the next season just two players: Michael Beasley and Mario Chalmers.

And even being the second overall pick in the 2008 draft wasn't enough to guarantee Beasley playing time with the new trio, as Riley dispatched him to Minnesota in a clear salary cap dump.

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