

The Franchise

LeBron James and the Remaking of the
Cleveland Cavaliers

**Terry Pluto and
Brian Windhorst**

Gray & Company, Publishers
Cleveland

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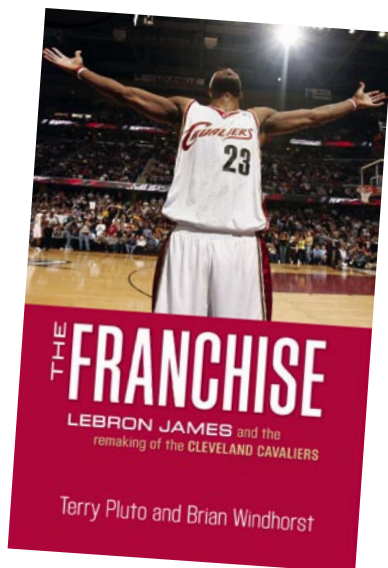
LeBron James and the Remaking of the Cleveland Cavaliers

Terry Pluto and Brian Windhorst

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Award-winning sports journalists Terry Pluto and Brian Windhorst give us an in-depth look at how a team and a city are being rebuilt around superstar LeBron James. When the Cleveland Cavaliers won the top pick in the 2003 NBA draft,

an entire city buzzed with excitement. How often does a LeBron James come along? Especially for Cleveland, a midmarket rustbelt city without a sports championship in fifty years, and for the Cavaliers, a team that had never reached the NBA finals. Now, everyone has a stake in LeBron. From billionaire team owner Dan Gilbert down to the popcorn vendors, everyone has something riding on this one guy. Chock full of facts and analysis.



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Terry Pluto AND
Brian Windhorst

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CHAPTER 1

“THE KIND OF GUY OTHER TEAMS WANT”

Getting The Guy

A puff of smoke . . .

That’s what you see coming from the hands of LeBron James before every game.

A big, white, fluffy puff of dreamy smoke.

It happens when James walks over to the scorer’s table seconds before the opening jump ball. He pours resin in his hands, quickly rubs them together, then sends his hands to the heavens, pulling them apart wide as the resin heads to the ceiling. It’s the same pre-game ritual Michael Jordan performed for years with the Chicago Bulls. Just as Jordan wore No. 23 and had a shoe contract with Nike, so does James. It’s a tribute to the player he most admired while growing up in Akron.

On this night, the puff of smoke went up before Game 6 of the 2007 Eastern Conference Finals. The Cleveland Cavaliers were facing the Detroit Pistons at Quicken Loans Arena in downtown Cleveland. Northeast Ohio was in a frenzy, the Cavs one victory away from their first-ever appearance in the NBA Finals. Their first in 37 years. Their first with LeBron James, who was only 22. Their first of many? Some fans dared to dream just that—that this was just the start of something big. Just like the white puff of smoke as James raised his hands and the white power expanded and floated up, up, up and away. Eyes closed, arms fully extended, sound and

light and energy pouring over him. It was as if he and the thirsty fans from his hometown were locked in an embrace.

On this night, something magic would happen. This was more than a basketball game, it was a sports romance. Try to think of another franchise being led out of the sports wilderness by a homegrown player. It would be as if Jordan had come from suburban Chicago instead of Wilmington, North Carolina. Or Larry Bird coming from Boston instead of French Lick, Indiana. Or Magic Johnson being a Los Angeles native rather than growing up in Michigan. Or Mickey Mantle in the Bronx, or Tom Brady in New England. It just doesn't happen, a superstar shouldering the dreams of his hometown as James did that night.

As the smoke rose from James, the fans at mid-court roared. He took it in, maybe not quite believing it all himself. James was born to a teenage single mother and spent much of his youth in the projects and on the streets. He could tell you of guys from his neighborhood who had been shot, guys in jail, guys just lost. He could look under the basket and see his mother, Gloria, in the prime seats, along with his girlfriend Savannah and their young son, LeBron Jr. They are a part of his dream. They'll never be hungry, never have to worry about a place to live, never wonder if someone will shut off the heat or electricity.

Sitting right behind James at mid-court was Dan Gilbert, the owner of the Cavaliers. He watches the games from directly behind the press table—not close to the benches but near the public address broadcaster and those in charge of game presentation: the pregame fireworks, video screen, the sound effects. James is part of *his* dream. A \$375 million dream, because that's what he paid for the franchise in 2005—probably twice what it was worth before James joined the team in 2003.

Gordon Gund was listening to this game, and he's a part of the dream, too. He can only imagine what James looked like, muscles rippling, anxious sweat steaming off his forehead as he threw that white powder to the sky. Gund is blind. His eyes at the game are the

words of Cavaliers radio broadcaster Joe Tait. This was 2007, nearly 24 years since Gund bought the team from Ted Stepien and saved it for Cleveland. He made that \$375 million deal with Gilbert for the sale of the team, but kept 15 percent. He longed to be a part of this night, when the Cavs finally had right guy at the right time.

Basketball is really about getting the right guy.

As Cavaliers veteran point guard Eric Snow once said, "You either have The Guy, or you are trying to get The Guy. In LeBron, we have the kind of guy that other teams want to get."

Getting The Guy . . .

So often, Cleveland fans have seen their guys leave to free agency or trades. Heck, the entire Cleveland Browns *team* left for three years—when Art Modell moved the franchise to Baltimore. Or their teams tried to get the guy, but he turned out to be the wrong guy as happened with the Cavs and Shawn Kemp and Danny Ferry.

But now, Ferry was a part of the dream, too.

After a sometimes frustrating playing career with the Cavs, Ferry is the guy hired by Gilbert to make it work for LeBron James. When Ferry left the team in the summer of 2000, he was respected for his work ethic and his relentless determination to transform himself into a viable NBA player, but he still is known by many Cavs fans as the guy who came in the Ron Harper trade, perhaps the worst deal in franchise history. Now, Ferry is the guy making the trades, and fans were glad to have him back.

Getting The Guy . . .

This night was not about dreams going up in a puff of smoke. It wasn't about a poll in 2006, when ESPN named Cleveland No. 1 in its fan misery index. The fans didn't lose LeBron, perhaps the greatest athlete ever to be born and raised in the working-class neighborhoods of Northeast Ohio. He had just signed a contract extension in summer of 2006, meaning he is committed to the franchise at least until the summer of 2010. He had defied the odds, by not only staying home to play but by overcoming curses and critics to enliven a dying team and inspire a depressed fan base.

Every seat in the arena on the mild June night was filled and he was the reason why. They had been filled all season, the Cavs breaking team records for sellouts and overall attendance. Outside, in a large plaza next to the arena, thousands more squeezed in together to watch the game on giant video screens provided by the team. Just four years earlier, the Cavs had attracted the fewest fans in the NBA. Thousands of them were wearing James' replica jersey in an array of colors and perhaps hundreds of thousands more were in bars, in their homes, or even on their jobs doing the same.

Getting The Guy . . .

Talk to the people selling hot dogs and T-shirts, those who own the restaurants and nightclubs around the arenas—they all will tell you LeBron has made their life better. Not just because he gives fans reason to cheer, but he makes people happy. The team wins, he scores, fans buy stuff—and the vendors make more money than they did before they had The Guy that forever changed this franchise.

Getting The Guy . . .

Across the court, Marv Albert welcomed a national television audience to the broadcast as James went through his popular pre-game maneuver. Before James came, the Cavs hadn't been on national television in more than three years. In the 2006–07 season, more than 50 games were on national TV. As the fans cheered and the cameras recorded, more than 300 media members settled into position to document the historic night, just four years after two of the three newspapers that followed the Cavs stopped even covering their road games due to lack of interest. The side of a nearby building in downtown was covered in a Nike ad for James, a spectacle that was so well received and photographed that the mayor had declared it public art so it could be protected. Dozens more surrounding buildings were covered with signs and banners cheering on the once forgotten team. In a courtside box, the new billionaire owner who had bought new seats for the fans and a new video board to show James highlights on, took in the scene. All of them

and more tied together in a package of success and money by the young man's talent and the smile and the puffs of magic smoke.

Getting The Guy . . .

This was a great night for Nike, the shoe company that won the biggest corporate battle for any amateur athlete to be its company spokesman. Nike bet more than \$100 million that there would be days like this, when an 18-year-old from Akron would become one of the NBA's elite players, an international celebrity, a savvy salesman for shoes and clothes. They never said it, but they want him to be their next Jordan, and James was coming off a Jordanesque performance in Game 5 of these Eastern Conference Finals with Detroit, scoring 29 of his team's last 30 points as the Cavaliers prevailed in double-overtime, 109-107. James put 48 points next to his name in the box score that night, and was utterly unstoppable. Jump shots, driving shots, slashing shots and slam dunks. Left hand, right hand—and sometimes, fans swore he did it with no hands. The ball just went from him into the basket. Cavs fans had never seen a performance like this because they never had a player like this. No matter how hard their franchise tried, it was never able to get The Guy.

Then through a white puff of smoke came LeBron James, on to the court, the hearts of fans beating little faster. To Cavs fans, he's their guy—The Guy. Who'd ever have dared dream it?

CHAPTER 2

“WHY WOULD I WANT THIS TEAM?”

LeBron is born . . . and a franchise nearly dies

On the day LeBron James was born, the Cavaliers played in Atlanta—and lost. The score was 109-98 as their record fell to 9-22. As LeBron James was coming into the world on December 30, 1984, born to a 16-year-old mother in Akron, Cavs coach Tom Nissalke was directing a team with a starting lineup of John Bagley, World B. Free, Cliff Robinson, Phil Hubbard and Lonnie Shelton on their way to a 28-54 season. The Cavaliers were a year removed from the Ted Stepien regime and being the most disgraced franchise in the NBA. They wore awful orange uniforms. Their home games averaged 5,075 fans—and that was the announced total; there were often only about 2,500 in the seats. The only reason the Cavaliers were still in business was because Gordon Gund owned the Richfield Coliseum, where the team played. If they moved to another city, Gund would have an empty building.

“It started in 1976 when my brother George owned the Cleveland Barons [of the National Hockey League] and he asked me to join him,” said Gordon Gund. “Nick Mileti owned the Cavs. Both of us played at the Richfield Coliseum. By 1977, Chase Manhattan Bank had foreclosed on the building and taken over the Coliseum. We didn’t think hockey could make it in the market and we were ready to move the Barons. The bank said they’d give us a significant ownership in the Coliseum if we’d try to keep the Barons there for

one more year [1977-78]. We did, but we couldn't draw enough to make it worth our while. We moved the Barons to Minnesota, where they combined with the North Stars."

That left Gund with the Coliseum and the basketball team as the only tenant. By 1981, the bank made a very attractive offer to Gund to take over the general partnership of the Coliseum. Gund had once worked for Chase Manhattan bank, so he understood their business and he knew pro sports from his ownership of the hockey team. He bought the Coliseum for a mere \$300,000.

Ted Stepien had bought the Cavs and the team was in the darkest ages of franchise history, which is saying something given the fact the Cavs began their existence in 1970 by losing 15 games in a row. When Stepien owned the team, he made so many terrible trades the NBA put restrictions on the team—all deals had to be approved by the league. It was the first ruling of that type in NBA history. Stepien and his sometimes coach, sometimes general manager Bill Musselman, had traded away every first round draft pick from 1982 to 1986. That's five consecutive No. 1 picks. That led to the NBA passing what became the "Ted Stepien rule," which prohibited any franchise from trading first round picks in consecutive seasons. In the three years of Stepien's ownership, the Cavs averaged 5,475; 5,769; and 3,916 fans. No one believed those totals, because tickets were being given away. Often, there were fewer than 1,000 fans in the stands.

"I'd go to those games and I wouldn't hear much of anything," said Gund, who is blind. His hearing is incredibly acute, almost serving as a way to compensate for his blindness. When Gordon Gund didn't hear much, there wasn't much to hear at those games other than the dribble of the ball and squeaking of the shoes on the court.

NBA Commissioner David Stern had come to Gund several times, offering to broker a deal for him to purchase the franchise from Stepien. Stern desperately wanted Stepien out of the league.

"I can get it for you cheap," Stern told Gund more than once.

“Why would I want it?” replied Gund. “There’s no way to turn it around. All the draft picks were gone. The reputation of the team in town was awful. It was a mockery. There were more flies than fans in the stands. I’m serious, fewer than 800 on some nights. I knew how many people were really in the building because we owned the building.”

Stern thought Gund would be desperate to keep the Cavs in his building. Stern thought wrong. The building cost Gund only \$300,000.

“It would not have cost that much to just wrap up [close down] the building,” Gund said. “I’d rather do that than buy something [the Cavs] that would just eat my [financial] lunch for years and years. I told the commissioner that we had to have first round picks, or there was no deal.”

Gund understood that he was the only possible owner.

“Who else would want it?” he said. “Stepien was threatening to move to Toronto. As I told David, ‘Paying anything for this is too much. It’s buying the right to lose money for a long time.’ And I meant that.”

Stern came up with an idea. What if the NBA would sell four first-round picks to the Cavs, replacing four traded away by Stepien? That intrigued Gund because it gave him a way to at least dream the franchise could become competitive. General Manager Harry Weltman also dealt with the league on this issue, and he helped Gund drive a hard bargain to get the picks.

“The owners were reluctant to sell the extra picks, but David convinced them,” said Gund. “In the end, it came together.”

The league agreed to sell Gund the four picks for about \$1 million—about \$250,000 each. The deal with Stepien was worth \$20 million, but Gund put up only \$2.5 million in cash. The \$17.5 million was paid out over the next 10 years. He also bought Stepien’s lucrative Nationwide Advertising as part of the deal.

If you put the numbers together, by the summer of 1983—only six months before the birth of LeBron James—Gund owned the

Cavaliers, the Coliseum and a first round draft pick for 1984, and had spent less than \$3 million in upfront money to pull off this deal. Remember, most of the money was paid to Stepien over the next 10 years, and some of that cash came from the profits of Stepien’s advertising agency that he had sold to Gund as part of the Cavaliers transaction.

“It turned out great for us,” said Gund. “But it was risky, no one knew what would happen back then.”

Gund certainly didn’t know that the same David Stern who brokered this deal would be announcing about 19 years later that the Cavs had just drafted LeBron James. Or that the man sitting in that TV studio representing the Cavs at the 2003 lottery would be Gordon Gund. Or that the ping-pong ball that bounced just right for the Cavaliers would end up raising value of the Cavs franchise to \$375 million. Nor could Gund ever have dreamed anything remotely approaching this financial fairy tale back on December 30, 1984, when he was listening to Cavaliers radio voice Joe Tait describe how his Cavaliers were losing, night-after-night. But hey, at least Ted Stepien was gone.

Gund also didn’t know what life would be like for a young LeBron James, because Gund’s youth was that of wealth. George Gund, his grandfather, was a beer-maker, and he had the idea of putting bottles in cardboard cases rather than wooden crates, which were more expensive. According to an article in *Smart Business* magazine, George Gund took \$130,000 out of his brewery’s budget and invested it into something that we know today as decaffeinated coffee. When the Kellogg Company bought it, George Gund pocketed \$10 million and the product became known as Sanka. He then moved into the banking business with a company called Cleveland Trust. When his grandfather died, the estate was estimated at more than \$600 million. A lot of it was designated to the Gund Foundation, which donates to charities. So making good deals was in the blood of Gordon Gund, just like finding the open man with a pass seems to come as natural to James as breathing or sleeping. But

both had to deal with adversity and breaks from life that just aren't fair. When Gund was 30, he went blind from a disease called retinitis pigmentosa. To this day, he's never seen the best player in the history of his franchise.

"But I do have a picture of him in my mind," said Gund. "I have felt his arms and shoulders, and I have a good idea how tall he is in comparison to me. I see strength not just in his body, but his face. I sense he's a very smart, very determined man who just flows up and down the court."

That's a pretty good description of LeBron James, the basketball player. But Gloria James didn't know that when she gave birth at the age of 16. She was young and scared. She has never even officially identified the biological father. Nor has LeBron. A man named Anthony McClelland has called area newspapers and television stations claiming to be James' dad. McClelland was not around much when James was growing up because he spent many years in prison for a variety of charges, including arson. Speculation in Akron is that James' father was a former local basketball star who died not long after leaving high school. Gloria James lived with her mother Freda James during the first few years of LeBron's life in a house on Hickory Street, one of Akron's bleaker areas. When Freda James died of a heart attack on Christmas Day, 1987, LeBron James was nearly three years old, Gloria James was 19. They began to move from place to place. They lived with friends and relatives, never anywhere for long. LeBron missed a lot of school until he moved in with the family of Frank Walker. That was in the fourth grade. Frank Walker helped coach youth football and basketball teams. In one season of Pee Wee football, James scored 19 touchdowns in six games playing for Walker.

Walker saw Gloria James was struggling with her own personal problems. When it was clear LeBron needed a place to live and a chance to get going in school, he offered to let the 10-year-old James move into his middle class home with his wife and three children. James said he missed 87 days of school in the fourth grade, but

none the next year when with the Walkers. Gloria visited often as she worked to pull her life together. With the Walkers, the children were up by 6 a.m. on school days, they had chores, homework had to be done. Rather than rebel, James embraced structure. It was the first sign of what would make him a good teammate and a very coachable star later in life. When James was 12, he moved out of the Walker's home and back with his mother.

There are times when James was asked, "Whose pictures did you have up in your room as a kid?"

He'd always answer, "Michael Jordan."

But it took a long time for him to have a room of his own, because of all the moves. He was Gloria's only child. But there were men to help her, starting with Frank Walker. Then came Dru Joyce II and Lee Cotton, who coached James in various summer league teams and later at St. Vincent-St. Mary.

"As a kid, LeBron liked to shoot the ball—a lot," said Joyce. He said it was common for the other kids to steal the ball from James, whose dribbling skills were raw.

"One day, we were driving down East Avenue [in Akron] and I was telling LeBron about passing the ball, how great players made their teammates better," said Joyce. "I talked to him about getting shots in the flow of the game."

Joyce had no idea how much would stick. James was 11 and not the son of a coach, not a kid who spent his early life hanging around practices with his big brother. "But that was the last time that I ever had to talk to LeBron about shooting the ball too much," said Joyce. "He just got it. He started passing the ball."

It's also when he connected with Dru Joyce III, the son of Dru Joyce II. He was the point guard on a team with Sian Cotton and Willie McGee that became a national AAU power when they were 12-year-olds, winning a national tournament in Orlando. The group would become the core of perhaps the greatest high school basketball team in the history of Ohio. It also would do much to prepare James for the NBA, although no one realized it at the time.

CHAPTER 3

“WHEN YOU TRADE FOR A STAR, THERE’S A RISK . . .”

Shawn Kemp arrives

The Cavaliers really wanted a star. They ended up with Shawn Kemp.

The year was 1997. LeBron James was 12 years old and in the sixth grade, with a Michael Jordan poster on the wall of his Akron bedroom. He was more of a Chicago Bulls fan than a Cavaliers fan because the Bulls had Michael and they won.

The Cavaliers were a frustrating team. They had made the playoffs three times in the previous four years under Mike Fratello—and won a grand total of one postseason game. Barely good enough to get there, not even close enough to stick around in the spring—a 1-9 record in the games that really count, the playoffs.

It had been that way since Lenny Wilkens left in the summer of 1993, back when losing in the second round after a 54-28 record in the regular season was considered a disappointment. That was when Brad Daugherty was healthy, when Larry Nance still had leap in his legs and when Mark Price was the best point guard this franchise had ever seen. It was back when the Cavs were good enough to dream, even if those visions usually ended with a nightmarish Michael Jordan jumper at the buzzer. It was the best of the Richfield Coliseum Era.

But when the Cavaliers gathered in a conference room at Gund Arena in the summer of 1997, the team had just finished their third

year in downtown Cleveland. It was the fourth year for Fratello as coach, and his worst with the Cavs: 42-40 record, missing the playoffs. Wayne Embry was the general manager, but that was merely a title, he believed. He said he had lost a power struggle to Fratello, who had gained influence with ownership.

"They were convinced we needed a star," said Embry. "I thought we were on the verge of putting together a pretty good team. We had Terrell Brandon, Chris Mills, Tyrone Hill . . . Bobby Phills was emerging. We had just drafted Vitaly [Potapenko] and Z [Zydrunas Ilgauskas] to give us some size."

This was the Cavaliers first attempt to Get The Guy, the one player who can change an entire franchise.

In Embry's mind, the Cavs didn't have to go star gazing. They just needed more time to develop, more time to draft well, more time to keep adding pieces. He also was convinced they needed another coach, because Fratello's grinding, defensive style never appealed to Embry—even though Embry agreed to hire Fratello after Wilkens departed. The big picture made it appear the Cavs were stuck where no NBA team wants to remain for long—in the middle. Win 40-some games, make the playoffs, lose quick, go home and draft in the middle of the first round. Then do it all over again next year. And next year. And next year. In Fratello's four years, the Cavs had won 47-43-47-42 games. They had watched five-time All-Star center Brad Daugherty retire at the age of 28 with massive back problems. They saw age catch up with Nance, injuries slow Price. They saw an aging Hot Rod Williams traded for a future draft pick, Craig Ehlo leave via free agency and join Lenny Wilkens with the Atlanta Hawks.

These were not even your big brother's Cavaliers.

The excitement sank as the ticket prices rose with the move from Richfield to the new Gund Arena in downtown Cleveland. Embry said when the team left Richfield, ownership did not want to tear down the roster, start over and hope to get lucky in the draft lottery. They wanted to win as many games as possible because they had

sold so many luxury suites, and the team was coming off of considerable success at the old Coliseum.

“To be fair to Fratello, we brought him in knowing he was the kind of coach who could perhaps compete for a title,” said Embry. “He was not hired to rebuild.”

The Cavs tried to do both, which is usually a fatal flaw for any franchise. Either you rebuild, or you play to win. If you try both, you won’t do either very well. Attendance peaked in 1994–95, the first year at Gund Arena when the team averaged 20,238. The next season, it was 17,807, then 16,895. The trend was obvious, the luster of the new facility was wearing off as they had only three sellouts. Season tickets were declining, so were sales of luxury suites.

“Trading for Shawn Kemp was purely a business decision,” said Embry. “It was about selling tickets, selling suites. We didn’t set out to deal for Kemp, I was first told just to find a star who was available and could create some fan interest.”

In Embry’s mind, this was the worst approach. But he believed he had lost influence with ownership. He also could see the point that the team needed to change something, that another season of 40-some wins and an early playoff exit was looming. While he didn’t like the idea of a “star search,” he also didn’t have a strong counter vision to offer.

“The truth is when you look at almost any championship caliber team, you find a star or two on the roster,” said Gordon Gund. “It was more than a business move, it was a practical one. It’s hard to get a star, but you have to try. They usually do make your team better.”

Gund is correct. The NBA is a star-driven league, more than even baseball or football. One reason is that five play at the same time in basketball, compared to nine in baseball, 11 in football. Actually, it’s 22 in football. The point is the fewer athletes who play at one time, the more impact one athlete can have upon the game. That’s especially true in a free-flowing sport such as basketball. When Michael Jordan spent a summer as an outfielder in the Class AA

Southern League, he discovered that baseball was far more difficult for him than basketball—and not just because fastballs were a 90-mph blur while other pitches curved, sunk and sailed.

"I couldn't tilt the game in my direction," he once said.

In baseball, you have to wait your turn to bat. You have to wait for the ball to be hit to you. You have to wait for the ball to come to you. In basketball, a star can miss a shot, get his own rebound and score. He can have a coach set up plays for him to shoot more than anyone else. Imagine a baseball manager having his best slugger bat 20 times a game, and his light-hitting shortstop never come to the plate. That's basketball. You can highlight your star by giving him many opportunities to glitter and have another player who is never supposed to shoot unless no one else is available because they are covered.

"A star is important, but it has to be the right star," said Jim Paxson, who would take over for Embry as general manager.

But as Gund also asked, "Has a team ever won a championship without a star?"

It's a reasonable question, and the answer is obvious—absolutely not!

You can name a seemingly faceless team such as the 1979 championship Seattle Supersonics coached by one Lenny Wilkens, but they had two young guys named Jack Sikma and Dennis Johnson who'd play in more than a few All-Star games. The recent version of the Detroit Pistons have two star guards in Chauncey Billups and Rip Hamilton, even if they aren't the type of personalities that shoe companies love to feature in commercials. Most championship teams have had guys named Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, Bill Russell and Michael Jordan in the center of their basketball dynasties. Is it possible to find a championship team without a Hall of Famer? Of course. But without any star? No way.

That's why the Cavs went on a star quest, all the while realizing a star doesn't come close to insuring a title—or even a deep drive into the playoffs. But without a star, a team has no chance.

According to Embry, Fratello and his staff rated the top players at each position. Embry said they had Jordan rated first, Shawn Kemp second in the entire league. Kemp was only 27, but had already been in the NBA for eight years as he turned pro out of high school. He was coming off a productive but stormy season in Seattle, averaging 18.7 points, 10.0 rebounds and making his fifth All-Star team. On the surface, he seemed to be in his prime. But he also was available. That's because he feuded with Coach George Karl. He was unhappy with his contract. He had been fined several times. He wanted more money. Karl wanted him out. General Manager Wally Walker wanted to add a less-troublesome player. There were a lot of miles on Kemp's 6-foot-10, 270-pound frame. He came into the league at the age of 18. He was the "Reign Man," because he seemed to reside above the rim. He could run, jump, dunk and seemed to rival Jordan and any other player in terms of sheer God-given athleticism. His shooting and ball handling skills were not star caliber, but he was terrific anyway because of his size, speed and ability to sky. He also had a sensational point guard in Gary Payton setting him up.

After Payton and Kemp led the Sonics to the 1996 Finals where they lost to Chicago, things began to fall apart. That can happen, as players start to worry more about their own agendas and contracts. They believe they were the reason the team had success, and they want to be paid. In the case of Kemp, he already had a contract that had been renegotiated, and he wanted it done again. He was especially upset when the Sonics signed free agent center Jim McIlvaine to a seven-year, \$33 million deal—and he averaged a whopping 2.3 points and 2.9 rebounds. The Sonics were desperate for more size, and they overpaid for McIlvaine. The Sonics rejected his request before the 1996–97 season, and he sometimes pouted. He gained weight. He battled with Karl. He seemed distracted and unhappy. He chewed and chewed on the fact that the Sonics had raised Gary Payton's salary to \$12 million, and McIlvaine was being paid \$3 million. He was only at \$3.3 million. But the Sonics had

already reworked his contract twice, and he had two years left. They told him to wait a year. He told them to shove it, he didn't want to play in Seattle any more. He was late for practices and flights, had occasions where he seemed disinterested. But he was so gifted, he still was an All-Star.

He also was available.

Embry knew Kemp had problems, lots of problems. Many had been in the newspapers already, such as his struggles with coaches and sulking over his contract. His weight was going up. There was a report of an incident in a bar, and rumors of drinking problems and possibly drug problems. His attitude with Seattle seemed to be that he didn't care where he was traded, it could be Siberia. Just give me a fat, new contract. Embry worked the phones, and helped put together a three-way deal. Milwaukee had an almost-star in Vin Baker, who also was prone to some attitude problems. Seattle had Kemp and his endless list of gripes and issues. Seattle decided that Baker's troubles couldn't be any worse than Kemp's. Turned out, they were close, as Baker also had weight problems and later, drinking problems. The Bucks were glad to dump Baker, but didn't want Kemp.

A former Milwaukee general manager, it was easy for Embry to get in on these discussions. Milwaukee had an interest in several Cavs players, especially Tyrone Hill and Terrell Brandon. These were the kind of players whom Embry loved. He drafted Brandon, traded for Hill. Brandon became an All-Star point guard, replacing Price. But Fratello didn't see the 5-foot-11 Brandon as being talented enough to lift his team to the level of contention. He did average 19 points in his previous two seasons. Hill was a determined power forward, a mechanical player with an inconsistent outside shot. But he loved to rebound. No, he lived to rebound. He rarely worried about his scoring, but averaged 13 points. More important to Embry and the team, Hill delivered 10 rebounds a night despite having limited jumping ability. He did it with his feet on the floor, his elbows out, his butt and back holding off an opponent as he

had a knack of establishing excellent rebounding position near the basket. Like most of that Cavs team, Hill squeezed out every drop of talent, but there wasn't much to squeeze.

The deal was in place: Milwaukee would send Baker to Seattle. The Sonics would ship Kemp to the Cavs. The Cavs would trade Hill and Brandon to Milwaukee. Backup point guard Sherman Douglas also would move from Milwaukee to the Cavs. Embry had three pages of information on Kemp. They knew drinking and weight were concerns. They also knew he had some children with different women. There were questions about his motivation. But even 80 percent of Kemp in his prime was still better than any player the Cavs had. At least, that was the theory of most Cavs management.

"In the meetings, they kept saying that when you trade for a star, there's risk," said Embry.

"We knew if Kemp could keep focused, he would be very good," said Gund. "Of course, that ended up being harder than any of us imagined."

Over the years, Gund has gained the impression that Embry has tried to back away from this trade. The owner went around the room and asked everyone if they were for or against the deal. Embry said he saw that everyone but him was in favor, and in the end, he did agree to go along with the trade—albeit reluctantly.

"When I heard it, I knew the trade was a mistake and I doubted it was a deal that Wayne Embry wanted to make," said Cavs broadcaster Joe Tait. "I knew they wanted a marquee player, but you don't want your marquee guy at the city jail. Shawn was great to me, very polite and friendly. But it was no secret that he had problems."

As far as Gund was concerned, when asked, Embry agreed to the deal—and he helped put it together, period. That meant he approved.

"It's interesting how things change over time," said Gund. "Sometimes, people are trying to protect their reputations."

The trade was a blunder on a talent level—they gave up too much in Hill and Brandon—but then the Cavs compounded the felony by

immediately presenting Kemp a new contract. They tore up his old Seattle deal, and gave him \$100 million over seven years—making him one of the highest paid players in the game. In a sense, they rewarded bad behavior as he forced Seattle to trade him with some stunts very disruptive to the team.

The contract was this:

\$8.6 million in 1997–98.

\$9.8 million in 1998–99.

\$10.8 million in 1999–2000.

\$11.7 million in 2000–01.

\$12.6 million in 2001–02.

\$21.5 million in 2002–03.

\$25 million in 2003–04.

When you look at how the contract was backloaded, with the big money in the later years, there's a sense that ownership may have been thinking, *Who knows if we'll own the team four or five years from now. Let someone else pay the guy.*

Embry suggested that ownership put in a weight clause at 265 in the new contract, but they decided to leave it at 275. Kemp showed up at 290 pounds, about 30 over his ideal weight. But the Cavs wanted to keep Kemp happy and decided not to fine him. Here's the irony: the season after the Kemp trade, Embry was voted Executive of the Year, partly because of the trade. He also retooled the team through the draft. He picked Derek Anderson and Brevin Knight in the first round, adding Cedric Henderson in the second round. Embry also acquired veteran Wesley Person in a trade, and 1996 first-round pick Zydrunas Ilgauskas suddenly was healthy, averaging 14 points and 8.8 rebounds in his first pro season on the court. Kemp was dragging around those 25 extra pounds, but still bulled his way to 18 points and 9.3 rebounds, becoming the first Cavalier voted to start in the All-Star game by the fans. The Cavs finished 47-35 with one of the youngest group of players in the league. Despite losing in four games to Indiana in the first round of the playoffs, there seemed to be hope.

In terms of attendance, Kemp did help. The average rose very slightly—only 47 more per game. But the trade stopped most season ticket holders and hardcore fans from drifting away—as seemed to be the case before the trade, according to the Cavs’ marketing research.

But the Cavs couldn’t maintain it.

Kemp was like too many great athletes. They don’t believe they’ll ever age. They don’t believe they’ll ever be injured. They don’t understand why everyone is unable to play the game as they do, or why anything about their talent will ever change. Kemp never thought he’d get fat. Even when his waistline kept expanding as his vertical leap was shrinking, he didn’t believe it. He acted like his bathroom mirror was one of those distorted ones in a funhouse—*That can’t really be me.*

He never thought it would be so hard just to run down the court—or to leap above the rim. He never thought he’d tire so fast, or have to work so hard just to lose any weight. He never thought he’d commit so many fouls, have so many shots blocked or have so many balls just bounce off his fingers. He never thought he’d be anything but an athlete in his middle 20s who was one of the purest athletes the NBA has ever seen. He certainly never understood what it meant to be a truly great player for a long time.

For too many athletes, the off-season is just that—time off.

They may play pickup basketball, lift a few weights and perhaps run some laps—but they don’t take it very seriously. They believe they deserve a break from the physical demands of the season. After six months of 82 games, plus training camp, plus the playoffs, they figure they deserve a break. Besides, they made millions of dollars. Time to head to Las Vegas or Atlantic City, hit the casinos and the restaurants.

But the stars who have long careers seldom spend much of their summers in lengthy pickup games. They hire personal trainers. They watch their diets. They lift the right weights to stay strong, but lean. They work on individual parts of their games. Michael Jordan

once spent most of his summer workouts in the gym, alone, dribbling around chairs with his left hand—because he discovered that he was driving too often to his right. Another summer, he worked on a 3-point shot from the top of the key. Yet another summer, it was low post moves—a little fall-away jumper—near the basket. His goal was to come back with something new every year to attack the defenses that continually were evolving to try and stop him.

Magic Johnson spent a summer practicing a strange one-handed set-shot from 3-point range. He discovered that defenses believed he could not make a shot from beyond 15 feet. He never had a reliable jumper, so he went back to the basics—a one-handed set shot: the ball on his finger tips, wrist cocked at a 90-degree angle, then a straight, quick follow-through as he released the ball. Johnson never became a great 3-point shooter, but it was another weapon available. But that wasn't enough for the Lakers star. He was intrigued by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's hook shot. It was unstoppable, and Magic begged his superstar teammate to teach him the sky hook. While Johnson's hook was never as pretty or shot from as high above his head as Jabbar's, it was a shot he could use inside. By the end of his career, the hook—like Jordan's little fadeaway jumper—became his most feared shot. And neither player had those shots when they began their pro careers.

Kemp didn't follow any of these examples, despite being told by coaches. When questions about his weight were raised, he simply pointed to his stats—he still averaged close to 20 points and 10 rebounds per game. He still was an All-Star, still a productive player. What's the problem, those extra pounds really didn't seem to hurt, right? In the playoffs, he averaged 26 points and 10 rebounds as the Cavs lost to Indiana in four games. So what if he fouled out of 15 games, most in the NBA. He was a physical presence inside. He may have been bigger, but he was still better than anyone in a Cavs uniform.

But the front office feared Kemp would continue to pack on the pounds, that it would eventually weigh down his game. They had

six years and nearly \$92 million left on his original \$100 million contract—they wanted him ready to play well for a long time. They asked him to stay close to the team after that first 1997–98 season in Cleveland so they could help him get in shape and monitor his weight. Kemp had little interest in that. The summer was his time, and he’d earned the rest. Privately, the Cavs feared what that would mean to his already growing girth and could lead to injuries, but publicly they said Kemp was a veteran, and he knew what was best for him.

Then came the lockout at the start of the 1998–99 season as the players and owners battled over a new labor contract. There would be no training camp. Players were not allowed to work out with coaches or members of the franchise. There were rumors the season might ever start as the labor battle dragged on, seemingly with no end in sight. Kemp wasn’t the only player who developed a disdain for conditioning during the lockout, but he became the worst offender. When play did resume on February 5, 1999, Kemp was *huge*. The Cavs tried to hide it, but he weighed in at 318. That was 28 more pounds than the previous season—and they considered him at least 20 pounds overweight at the time of the trade.

After the promising 1997–98 season with the 47-35 record, the Cavs sank to 22-28. Kemp somehow averaged 20 points, but he was slow, foul-prone and too often late for team flights and practices. He was 28, but looked closer to 38.

In the summer of 1999, two years after the Kemp deal was supposed to revive the franchise, owner Gordon Gund fired both Wayne Embry and Mike Fratello. Embry was to remain as an “advisor” to new general manager Jim Paxson. Embry had a year left on his contract, but Gund said when he decided to fire Fratello, it also made sense to move up the switch from Embry to Paxson. Gund hired Paxson in 1998 with the idea that he’d learn from Embry for two years, then take over the team.

The new NBA labor agreement brought in the luxury tax, a penalty if a team exceeded the salary cap. It’s a bit more complicated

than this, but the basic concept is if the salary cap was set at \$50 million—and your payroll is \$60 million—you must pay \$10 million to the league in a luxury tax. It's the luxury of going over the salary cap. There are exceptions that allow teams to go through the cap without penalties, but the Cavs were looking at being a team over the cap as Kemp's salary continued to rise each year.

"We did not want to be capped out [and pay a luxury tax]," said Gund. "He also had to find a way to get better, and we had to get rid of some of our longer contracts of players we knew would not be with us when we were making a run at a championship."

Gund remains sensitive about the Kemp deal, and he still wants fans to know it wasn't only his idea: "When things go well, a lot of people take credit. When they don't, it's ownership's fault."

The one guy in the front office who was blameless for this was Paxson, who inherited Kemp along with the stricter salary cap rules. As the Cavs were heading into the year 2000, the franchise was sinking under the weight of Kemp and other decisions made by ownership and the front office.

"After the collective bargaining agreement was signed, there were three years before the luxury tax went into effect," said Paxson, meaning the Cavs had to get rid of Kemp's contract by 2002 or face major financial consequences.

The 1997-98 team that won 47 games had fallen apart by 2000. Kemp was getting fatter. Ilgauskas suffered a major foot injury and no one knew if he'd ever play again. Brevin Knight was developing knee troubles. Cedric Henderson went from a promising 10-point scorer as a rookie to an invisible man. He could play stretches of 15-to-20 minutes and not even take a shot or grab a rebound.

"We had to start chopping contracts, not just Kemp's," said Paxson. "We feared we'd be a mediocre team and a tax-paying team."

That was the worst of both basketball worlds. Paxson started dealing with players such as Bob Sura and Wes Person, who had long-term deals. He also had to somehow get Kemp to play at a reasonable level.

“After the lockout, he may have been up to 330 pounds,” said Paxson. “One year, he came in at 315 or 320. He’d get his weight down to 290, and the media would say he was getting in shape, but he was still too heavy. To me, it was amazing he could play at all.”

Like Wayne Embry before him, Paxson talked to Kemp. Like Embry, he found Kemp to be very engaging and polite. He’d promise to change, “saying all the right things,” explained Paxson. “I think in his heart, he meant it. But he didn’t have the character and background to [change].”

In one meeting with Kemp, Paxson said Gund had two 25-pound weights waiting for the team’s highest paid player. He told Kemp to pick up the weights, and said, “Shawn, this is what you’re carrying around on your body right now.”

It was a very vivid show-and-tell lesson, and Kemp promised to take it to heart and take in less when he sat down for dinner. But it was like so many of his other promises. He meant it when he said it, but forgot it later. The Cavs also were certain Kemp had a drinking problem. They suspected some drug use because he was chronically late. The team was losing. In Paxson’s words, “After the lockout, fan interest was almost non-existent. You couldn’t sell tickets, you couldn’t give them away. No one was coming to the games.”