The night was May 22, 2003. The Cleveland Cavaliers were fresh off a season that saw them win 17 games and lose 65. Although there were some a lot of knuckleheads on the team, general manager Jim Paxson did something he hadn't been able to do in any other year: he put the Cavs in a position to win. They weren't looking to win a game, a playof series or a championship. The prize was the rights to draft local basketball phenom LeBron James in the upcoming draft.

The stakes were high. The Cavs needed a shot in the arm. Forget about hoping for a championship. They needed a superstar. There were some promising young players on the roster such as Carlos Boozer and Dajuan Wagner, but those guys couldn't be counted on to build a team around. They were better suited to be supporting cast members. Unfortunately for the Cavs, they simply couldn't be counted on. One was given a raw deal in his genetic makeup and the other took advantage of gullible businessmen into a bigger contract in Utah. Regardless, the Cavs needed a franchise player.

In the book *Tales from the Cleveland Cavaliers: The Rookie Season of LeBron James* by Roger Gordon, Austin Carr described how vastly important the events of May 22, 2003 were. After discussing broken feet in key playoff games, being in the same division as the Jordan Bulls, Brad Daugherty's bad back, Zydrunas Ilgauskas' foot injuries and even his own injury-laden career, Carr said that "the basketball gods looked down and said 'It's Cleveland's turn." And indeed it was. Carr openly wept tears of joy at the draft lottery watch party at Champps in Valley View. Strangers who were openly crying were hugging in a raucous scene. Carr proceeded to

say that "it meant so much to the area and the franchise."

Things weren't going to be easy. Teams do not win immediately even with a talent like LeBron James. After All, there is a reason the Cavs only won 17 games in the previous season. This was blatantly obvious when the Cavs lost in his first NBA game to the still-elite Sacramento Kings by a score of 106-92. James lived up to the hype and delivered a 25 point, 6 rebound, 9 assist and 4 steal performance. The announcing crew was gushing over his unselfishness James gave up an open dunk so he could pass to a trailing Ricky Davis.

It didn't matter that the Cavs finished the 2003-2004 campaign with a 35-47 record. For the first time since the Cavs played in Richfield, there was hope for the franchise. James finished the season the season putting up numbers simply unheard of for a rookie. Nineteen year old kids who came out of high school simply do not average 20.9 points, 5.5 rebounds, 5.9 assists and 1.6 steals. The fact that the Cavs were able to land a guy who was doing this had the city collectively pinching themselves to make sure that they weren't dreaming. The fact that he was a local kid sweetened the pot.

With all good things come bad. Having a talent like LeBron James in Cleveland is the ying to the

yang that is seemingly everybody speculating on where he will inevitably bolt to. It was difficult to ignore that noise and simply enjoy what was happening in Cleveland. The better LeBron James and the Cavs got meant that there was more attention in Cleveland. It was fun having the most allowable nationally televised games and the advertising campaigns , but along with that came endless speculation and quotes from James that made every Cavalier fan nervous at the core.

The Cavs ultimately came up short in the LeBron James era. They were a very good team that contended for a championship and drew crowds. When Cleveland lost to the Boston Celtics in the 2010 conference semi-finals, it was impossible to not acknowledge the direction that the franchise was heading in. It didn't take seeing LeBron James publicly distancing himself by tearing off his Cavaliers jersey before even entering the locker room after game 6 in Boston, but he did it for good measure.

In the seven years that LeBron James played in Cleveland, there were some great times and some bad times. The 2010 playoffs were supposed to be the year that the Cavs win Cleveland its first championship 46 years. Winning a championship would have made leaving very difficult for LeBron James when he reached free agency on July 1st. Instead of that, the Cavs saw another second round exit with a lot of distractions along the way. There was the infamous elbow injury that the team and coaching staff refused to acknowledge was real. The Cavs lost to the Celtics by a final score of 104-86 in the second game of the series, which also happened to be the day that James was presented with his second straight MVP trophy.

The worst moment of that potential title run was game 5. Before it happened, it was billed as the biggest game in Cavalier history. There was speculation that it would be the last time Cleveland fans would witness James play for their team. The crowd was ready, but the Cavs were not. Led by James, the Cavs lost by a final score of 120-88. James finished with 15 points. He only took 14 shots and made 3 of them. As an apology to the fans, James said that he

"spoils" them with his good play. In other words, he set the bar too high by being so great, so the fans should lay off him when he lays an egg in the biggest game in franchise history.

The LeBron James public relations campaign has done a lot to improve his image. It seems like only in Cleveland do people remember these occurances. Winning cures all and by winning a championship for the Heat, people have went from loathing James to revering him.

James is easily the best player in the world and one of the best that we've seen in many years. There is a reason that the city of Cleveland was so deeply hurt when he went on ESPN and made a reality TV contestant out of the fans of Cleveland, New Jersey, Los Angeles, New York and Chicago. The thing about The Decision is that no matter how spiteful it was, the only reason it hurt so much was because of how good he is. If Omri Casspi did something similar, it wouldn't even make news. By making his Decision, it was painfully obvious that the Cavs were facing a long and painful rebuild. We saw the team struggle mightily in the first season without James. What was frustrating about that season was that it justified James' Decision to the national audience. This was never about James' decision to Cleveland. The resentment was due to his Decision.

The James and Cleveland breakup couldn't have happened in an odder manner than it did. Having said that, we had some great times along the way. I'll never forget staying in on a

Wednesday night in on a late October night in 2003 to see what the big deal was about this James kid. I grew up a big Cavs fan in the 80's and early 90's, but lost interest in the team the night that Michael Jordan hit another series clinching jumper against the Cavs in the 1993 playoffs. James coming to the team and delivering as well as he did has rekindled my interest in the NBA and for that I am grateful.

The sense of community that he ironically helped produce in Cleveland was great. Watching the Cavs beat the Pistons in game 5 of the 2006 playoffs at a watch party in Cleveland Heights was a great memory that I will never forget. Much like the night the Cavs won the lottery, strangers were hugging and celebrating together. The first playoffs run with James was insanely fun. Being at the Quicken Loans Arena and getting a much coveted Witness shirt was yet another great memory. The 20,562 fans that were in attendance took joy in wearing that shirt in public after the game because it was a way of telling people "I was there and I saw LeBron James drop a triple double in his first playoff game." The night that the Cavs clinched their first and only finals berth was great as well. It is no secret that Zydrunas Ilgauskas had some horrible personal events that year and seeing LeBron James immediately run to Ilgauskas after winning game 6 is a moment that even the most seasoned hater of James has to admit was nice.

On a personal note, my favorite memory of LeBron James in Cleveland was on May 3, 2006. This was the night of game 5 against the Wizards. It was a pivotal game because the series was tied at 2-2 and it was as close to a "must-win" game as one can be without facing elimination. Gilbert Arenas and LeBron James battled in what was one of the most fun match-ups that I have ever seen. James finished with 45 points compared to Arenas who scored 44 for the Wizards. The Cavs found themselves in a 119-120 deficit with only a few seconds left in the game. During the last timeout of the game, the arena grew quiet. The Cavs had given up a lead and the only person keeping the Cavs in the game was Eric Snow. This was a recipe for disaster. I was at that game and the silence was deafening. It was understood that the Cavs would give up a lead in the game and lose to the Wizards in 6. Luckily for the Cavs, that didn't happen. Larry Hughes inbounded the ball to LeBron James, who snuck past Antawn Jamison on the baseline and converted a layup to give the Cavs a 121-120 win. Personally, I was going through a lot that day and I almost sold my ticket because I had too much on my plate to even think about going to a game and trying to have fun. Watching the ball go through the hoop and seeing the Quicken Loans Arena go from deafening silence to deafening celebratory noise is one of my favorite memories in life.

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