For LeBron James, an Olympic Gold Medal was the easy part. Next to the theatrics of Kobe Bryant and Dwayne Wade, co-owners of Saturday's hugely harrowing, immensely entertaining finale, LeBron's performance against the Spaniards was downright restrained. But despite being handcuffed by foul trouble early and late, LBJ still scored fourteen points on 6-of-9 shooting with seven rebounds, six of them during Team USA's game-clinching fourth-quarter run. He passed beautifully, was powerful on the boards, anchored the defense- such as it was, and there was precious little in this game - and, voice echoing off the Great Wall and booming across the continents, was once again Team USA's vocal centerpiece.

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So, thanks in no small part to the *wunderkind* from St. Vincent-St. Mary, the

United States has reclaimed its mantle of basketball capital of the world, and in doing so LeBron did plenty to burnish his own image in the eyes of the public. He delivered on his guarantee to bring home the gold medal, won plaudits as the best basketball player on the planet and praise as Team USA's leader, and even received a compliment from Charley Rosen, who hands out niceties to LBJ like a sweatshop hands out Christmas bonuses. Like his teammates, he performed brilliantly, with passion, flair, and class.

And yeah, that was the easy part. Now comes the latest edition of the hard part.

LeBron's mission in Beijing was to help lift USA Basketball back to the heights it regards as its birthright, and if he faltered, he had three or four more of the best players on earth to pick up the slack. His mission in Cleveland is to lift a franchise to a height it's never been, and a city to a height it hasn't been in so long, it might as well be forever. Kobe already has three rings, and as a Los Angeles Laker, he's simply another chapter in the gilt-papered volume of that team's illustrious history. Dwayne Wade has a ring. The expectations for Carmelo Anthony have been adjusted downward after yet another first-round exit for the disorganized, defensively challenged Nuggets. For them, anything that happens from here on out is practically gravy. LeBron alone carries on his brawny shoulders two generations of an entire region's collective busted dreams. He alone is called on to expiate the sins of others. He might not have asked for the task, but that doesn't matter. It's his.

It's a challenge unlike anything else, and LeBron's legacy will stand or fall on how he meets it. If he fails or bails, for all his greatness, he's Jim Chones's fragile foot, Earnest Byner's shaky ball security, Jose Mesa's reluctance to trust his fastball all over again. He's just another clip in those ubiquitous "Cleveland sports failures" montages the networks always show when one of our teams is in the playoffs. If he succeeds, he's bigger than Moses. The Israelites, after all, only

wandered the Sinai for forty years. Cleveland is at forty-four, and counting.

A championship for this city would be the biggest team accomplishment in all of American professional sports- outside possibly the Cubs reaching and winning the World Series- and LeBron plays in a league that, more than any other, demands championship bling as the cover charge for immortality. He has to get it done *here* . He can't run from it. It'll follow him wherever he goes. He can be the first billionaire athlete, he can be a global icon, he can win more Gold Medals, hell, he can win a title somewhere else, but failure in Cleveland- and anything short of a championship is a failure- would leave a purple welt on his legacy.

Or maybe it's all about the big market and playing in front of Jay-Z every night. But I'm not so sure. I think the sporting world will recognize a Cleveland championship for the feat it is. People are aware of the drought. They've seen the montage enough times to know the particulars. Winning it all here would be a Very Big Deal, not to mention hauling a franchise from the depths of sport to the pinnacle. I'd like to think that a man of LeBron's background, vision and understanding of history recognizes an opportunity to pull off something more significant any individual honor, any endorsement, and yes, any Olympic Gold Medal.

That's not to belittle at all what LeBron and his teammates accomplished these past two weeks. They did us proud as Americans and devotees of American sport, and LeBron did us proud as Cavaliers fans and residents of this region, right down to his joyous medal-stand *"Whaddup, Ohio!"* to the NBC camera. But the experience of playing with the best in the world is a means to an end. Conquering the world is only another step toward a greater conquest: the parade route down Euclid Avenue. The Redeem Team was fantastic. Authorship of an Impossible Dream is better.