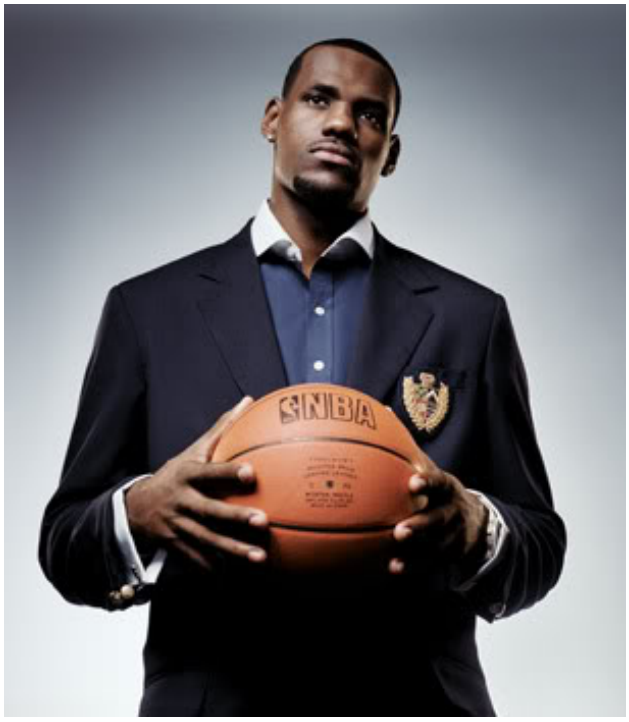
Sometime in the next couple of weeks, LeBron James will become eligible for a contract extension. He will be able to sign a contract that will guarantee him something north of $100 million for the next six years. He will be able to collect that money even if he blows out a knee the next day and never steps on a basketball court again. He will be able to guarantee stability for himself and his family. The odds are that he will NOT sign that extension. What's more, it makes perfect sense for him to not sign that extension. John Hnat explains in his triumphant return to the site.



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(But save the Cleveland inferiority complex stuff, readers. It's not a Cleveland thing. LeBron would not be signing that extension if he played in New York, Los

Angeles, Boston, or any other "major" market. We'll get to that later.)

As Cavs fans, we may have a difficult time understanding why LeBron would forego the chance to lock in several more years with the only professional team he has ever known. He has said several times that he is happy here and is happy with the direction the organization is moving. The team has certainly improved its talent base the last few years. But let's put down the wine and gold pom-poms for a moment, and look at this issue from James's perspective. When we do that, the question isn't "why isn't he re-signing now?"; instead, the correct question to ask is "why *should* he?"

Understand this: LeBron has *no* incentive to sign an extension. None. It's not like signing now is going to entice free agents to sign with Cleveland (especially with this summer's tepid free agent pool; coming up short for Trevor Ariza is more of a blessing than a curse). Chris Bosh (to throw out a name) couldn't go to Toronto management and demand to be let out of his contract if James decided to stay in Cleveland. And LeBron is the rare player who does not have to worry about financial security. He could miss the entire 2009-10 season, and teams would still be lined up to offer him the maximum contract next summer.

There is one major reason why LeBron will not sign an extension this summer. And it has nothing to do with the quality of the team around him. (However, it is worth noting that by not signing, James keeps Cavs GM Danny Ferry very focused on improving the team as much as possible - more so than if his star player were under lock and key for the next half-decade. Also, James keeps his options open, in case the Cavs suddenly and unexpectedly nosedive.) It has nothing to do with bringing in Shaquille O'Neal, or not bringing in Ron Artest, or not having a legitimate second superstar on the roster.

So what is the reason? *Because LeBron James wants to do what is best for LeBron James, Inc.*

Bear in mind that LeBron is not just a basketball player; he's a *brand*. He sells for Nike, Sprite, Vitamin Water, State Farm, you name it. He has made it known that he wants to be a billion-dollar athlete.

How is he going to get there? By selling products.

What does it take to sell products? Advertising and marketing.

That truth leads us to this question: *do you really think that LeBron James is going to pass up a year of free marketing?*

Because that is exactly what LeBron would be doing if he signs an extension this summer. For the next year, LeBron's impending free agency will be the largest story in basketball, and perhaps in all of sports. Web sites and traditional print media will run story after story about where he could be headed as a free agent. He'll be on ESPN almost every night. He'll be the topic of conversation between Ernie and Kenny and Charles on every TNT halftime show. We thought that the speculation about LeBron's future was already intolerable; now, it really begins.

All of that attention will only help LeBron (and LeBron Inc.). It'll be worth about a thousand of those Bron-Kobe puppet ads. When James and the Cavs visit Madison Square Garden this season, the stands will be filled with kids wearing their Nike Air LeBrons, at $150 a pop. As the saying goes, you can't buy that kind of publicity. The best thing for LeBron is that he doesn't have to - all of that attention will cost him nothing. (As well as his sponsors. For all the talk about the mythical "big market" clause in LeBron's Nike contract, maybe we should be asking instead if Nike required James to become a free agent, in order to maximize the free publicity.)

We are talking about an asset that is worth probably several millions of dollars. There is no way that James is going to surrender it for nothing. Yet if he re-signs

with the Cavs when he becomes eligible later this month, James would be doing exactly that.

Many in the media (especially those in the national media markets) will say that LeBron didn't sign an extension because he is tired of playing in backwards ol' Cleveland, and that he desires the bright lights of a major market. If you believe that statement, then re-read the last few paragraphs. LeBron would be giving up free publicity by re-signing now. That is true if he plays in Cleveland. It would also be true if he played in New York. Or Los Angeles. Or Miami. Or [fill in the name of any other major market here]. Yes, there are still those who believe that a superstar must be based in a large city to really cash in on his fame. (Of course that is true. Look at the NFL's top earner, Peyton Manning, who plays in the huge market of ... Or how about the #1 earner in all of sports, Tiger Woods, whose home is the "city that never sleeps" called ... Hey! Look behind you!) Not quite. LeBron would be in the same position no matter where he played. The same forces would be present, regardless of geography.

So don't be surprised when July Whatever comes and LeBron James does not extend his contract with the Cavs. The Cavs probably won't even announce that they've made him an offer. They will, behind the scenes, just for the record; and they know that LeBron will smile and say "no". (Or maybe more accurately, "not now".) And don't be surprised at each of the ten million times this season when James is asked about his future plans, and he provides a coy non-answer like "we'll talk about it after the season" or "I want to play where I have the best chance to win". Answers intentionally designed to give hope to many teams (and their fans!) that *maybe LeBron will be ours next season!*

If basketball fans want to take that lack of an extension as guaranteed proof that LeBron has decided to leave Cleveland for another team, so be it. The simple fact is, when you look at the decision from the perspective of LeBron James, there isn't much of a decision to be made -- even if, in his heart, he has never once thought about leaving his hometown.