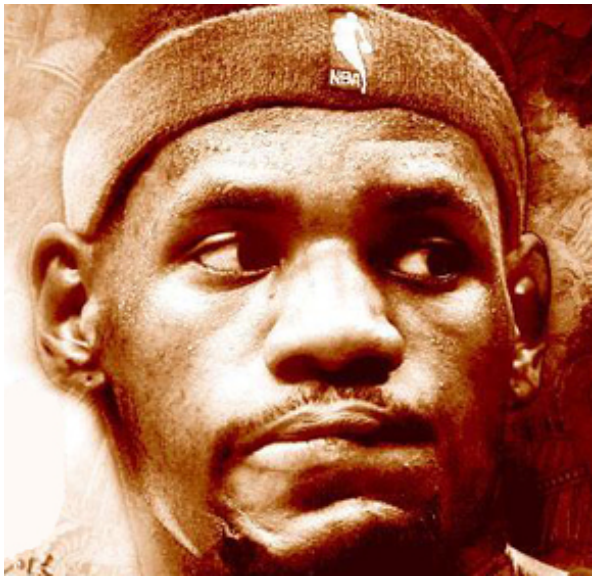

What has become of us? Why do we choose to follow those who would, at the drop of a hat, betray the decidedly American integrity and morals that are taught us from our birth? In life … in politics … in sports. Why does not every sports fan revile and castigate every multi-million-dollar athlete who puts their own selfish motives ahead of the good of the team and the community?

Case in point -- you guessed it -- LeBron James. And an extreme case, at that.

“Get over it,” my friends tell me. “It’s just basketball.”

“It’s more than basketball,” I shout back. “It’s about pride. It’s about loyalty. It’s about effort. It’s about dedication. It’s about everything American.”

It’s also not about *how* he did it, as many contend. It’s about *what* he did, which many overlook.

James’s oft-stated goal has always been to transcend basketball. Well, friends, after seven years he’s finally reached that goal. His selfish, imperious, despicable actions during the recent

National Basketball Association playoffs accomplished just that. They go to the very core of our American philosophy: never say die, never give up, be true to your team.

(In a column written shortly after the playoffs ended, I supported James's effort. Silly me. The elbow thing was an acting job worthy of Sir Laurence Olivier himself. I'm old enough to know better, but still naïve and innocent enough to be forgiven, I hope.)

The Case Against L.B.J.

In the American court of law when a crime is committed, the prosecution must prove that the alleged perpetrator had the opportunity, means and motive to commit the crime. Given the facts that have come to light in the past two months, it is by no means conclusive (but rather apparent) that James had the opportunity, means and motive to make sure that our Cavaliers did not beat the Boston Celtics in the Eastern Conference playoffs.

Why would he? His transcendent abilities on the basketball court were already established with back-to-back Most Valuable Player titles. His basketball future was already determined: He'd get paid almost $100 million for the next four or five or six years, no matter who he played for. His plans to jump ship to join Dwyane Wade in Miami and supposedly form the core of a "team for the ages" were already laid. He had absolutely nothing to gain by leading his team to the NBA championship. Indeed, he had much to lose if the Cavaliers won and he still packed his bags for South Beach: face.

If James did not give his best effort on the court that week, he is the scum of the earth. That kind of fraud perpetrated on Cavalier fans, the city of Cleveland, the NBA, and anyone who espouses Judeo-Christian values was more dishonest and more blatant than even Pete Rose's indiscretions (which, incidentally, resulted in a permanent ban from Major League baseball).

Think about that. How many athletes in your lifetime have been seriously accused of giving less than their best effort? None that you can think of? Neither can I. Rose himself was not banned because he gave less than 100 percent effort, he was banned because he was betting on games.

What James's actions suggest he did is called betrayal. In some quarters it's called cheating, in a backwards way. It's a knife in the back, and no right-thinking American should accept (much less worship) anyone capable of it, whether your hometown is Cleveland or Strongsville or Miami or Podunk City, Iowa.

The Case for Dan G.

Since James's departure, various purported Cavalier fans -- including some who frequent this site -- have called for owner Dan Gilbert to "blow up" the Cavaliers and start all over. They have suggested that he "tank" the next couple of seasons so that the Cavs can begin anew in a few years with some high draft choices.

Was it not just eight years ago that Gordon Gund and Wayne Embry tanked the season so that their ping-pong balls would outnumber all others in the NBA draft? So that they would stand the best chance of drafting James, who would lead them to multiple NBA championships?

And seven years later, how did that turn out?

That's karma for you, and it'll get'cha every time. (It'll eventually get the Miami Heat, too.)

I applaud Gilbert's letter to the fans of Cleveland following "The Decision," even if it was written in the heat of the moment. In that short missive, Gilbert exhibited the integrity and the passion that we should expect of a true leader. He was telling the whole world that he will never say die, never give up; that he will endeavor to assemble the best possible team every season; that he will not accept defeat without giving every last ounce of effort.

That's my kind of guy. It's what I expect from me and what I cherish in those around me.

What's Important

So often, we forget that what's important in life (and in sports) is not the destination but the journey. The Price-Nance-Daugherty Cavalier teams of the late '80s and early '90s never won an NBA title, but what fun they were! What memories! The Cleveland Indians teams of 1995-1998 never won a World Championship, but what fun they were! What memories!

(Though I hate to admit it, even the LeBron-led Cavaliers provided some quality, memorable moments. For those games -- played before the turncoat had formulated his plans -- we should be forever thankful.)

Today, however, you can count me among the true basketball fans who will never, ever watch a game (either in person or on television) involving that treacherous lowlife traitor LeBron James. But count me, too, among those who will continue to follow Gilbert and the Cavaliers to the ends of the Earth, win or lose. It's the American way.