The king is dead. But he can still play like one when he's motivated enough.

Maybe LeBron will wilt against the Celtics or Magic in the playoffs again next spring. Maybe his time in Miami will yield no rings. Maybe he'll retire closer to verbal sparring partner Charles Barkley than personal idol Michael Jordan on the spectrum of NBA superstars.

We can watch that play out over the next five months. But what is certain is LeBron's superlative talent, which by itself is more than enough to polish off one of the league's dregs in an early December regular season game.

National media scribes are hailing LeBron's 38-point effort in a 118-90 obliteration of the Cavs on Thursday night as a triumphant return to his old stomping grounds. LeBron gets the laurel wreath and we get painted as petty scoundrels who would dare boo such a majestic talent for having the audacity to leave our smelly burg for bigger and better things.

But LeBron's performance could have been predicted. Maybe he fed off the jeers. Maybe he was back in his comfort zone playing on the court he called home for seven years. But more likely, he was facing a team that simply didn't have the personnel to stop him.

That's the real story to come out of Thursday's game. The Heat can measure success based on the rings they win or don't win. The Cavs' forthcoming challenge is based on survival. This team is in a world of hurt, and the responsibility of yanking this franchise out of the muck will fall squarely on the shoulders of a very rich man from Livonia, Mich. who sat courtside and simmered as the Heat toyed with the Cavs.

The man is Cavs owner Dan Gilbert, now the central figure of the franchise with LeBron drinking in the vices of Miami.

Gilbert has a history of making smart business moves. He's shown an ability to get creative with developing revenue sources. But he's also a very emotional person, and he took LeBron's departure quite personally.

Gilbert did have reasons to be angry. LeBron cut off all contact with Gilbert in the weeks leading up to his decision. There were strong indications that LeBron had inappropriate contact with members of the Heat, including Dwyane Wade, while he was still under contract with the Cavs.

Then LeBron turned his departure into an hourlong TV spectacle, rejecting us in front of an international audience.

Gilbert flew off the handle with an open letter roasting LeBron in the hours following "The Decision." And you could make a case that he hasn't flown anywhere near the handle since.

Now, Gilbert's obsession is showing the world how LeBron, his cronies and the Heat conspired to wrong him and his franchise. He's retained a legal team, which is reportedly going through records as far back as 2008, trying to find evidence of collusion and premeditation that Gilbert can drop on the desk of David Stern.

In Cleveland, we think it's cool to have a justice-minded owner willing to go the Woodward and Bernstein route to try and take down LeBron. But at what price?

What is obsessing over how LeBron wronged the Cavs and Cleveland really going to accomplish? LeBron is still going to make his one or two trips to Cleveland over the next six years, he's probably going to administer beatdowns more often than not, and his teams will be far more successful than the Cavs, regardless of whether he's now a member of the Heat for life, or has yet another team in his future.

LeBron's not going to jail for this. He didn't commit a statutory crime, no matter how much damning evidence Gilbert can dredge up. He's not going to be kicked out of the league. He won't get suspended. He probably would, at most, incur a fine.

As for the Heat? The most severe punishment the league could levy against the Heat for improper contact with LeBron would be revoked draft picks. The Cavs currently own two future Miami first-rounders as part of the sign-and-trade the two teams orchestrated to complete

LeBron's defection.

Is using those picks in 2017 and 2019 a fair price to pay for having a conspiracy theory proved right?

To step back and look at Gilbert's behavior since LeBron's departure, it seems as if he's more focused on getting even with LeBron than tending to the sorry state of his team. It's still early, there hasn't been enough time for events to unfold, but it's a disturbing trend to keep an eye on.

At some point, the obsession with LeBron-hate will subside for even the most passionate of fans. And all that will be left is the reality that the Cavs are a league bottom-feeder facing a lengthy rebuild. Gilbert needs to admit that reality. There is a time for stubborn defiance, and a time to cool off and get rational.

Now that LeBron has come back to Cleveland and made his emphatic statement of dominance over his haters, now might be the time to let LeBron go and let nature run its course in South Beach, where it is far from guaranteed that three massive egos are going to be able to adapt enough to win a single title, let alone form the dynasty expected of them.

Now is definitely the time for Gilbert to assess where his team is, and where he is as an owner. Along with Rock Financial and Quicken Loans, the Cavs are another of Gilbert's ventures poised to hit the skids in a down economy. Gilbert needs to tend to the Cavs like he would any of his other businesses when they're hurting.

When Gilbert took over the Cavs, many in Cleveland worried that he'd become a meddlesome owner who would make ill-informed decisions on personnel and treat the Cavs like a personal toy. Instead, he proved himself as one of the best owners a Cleveland team has ever had, pumping money into the franchise infrastructure, building a new practice facility, making improvements to his team's arena, and signing off on extra payroll burden to try and win a title.

With LeBron gone, the Cavs need that smart-yet-aggressive owner to remain in the building more than ever.

If Gilbert keeps stalking LeBron while the Cavs continue to crumble, he's back to being the owner we feared we were getting when he bought the team in 2005.

LeBron's defection was motivated primarily by greed, and it set the Cavs back at least three to five years. That's LeBron's fault. If it leads to long-term losing or the ruination of Gilbert as an NBA owner, that's Gilbert's fault.

Hopefully Gilbert can stop throwing darts at his LeBron pictures long enough to realize that.