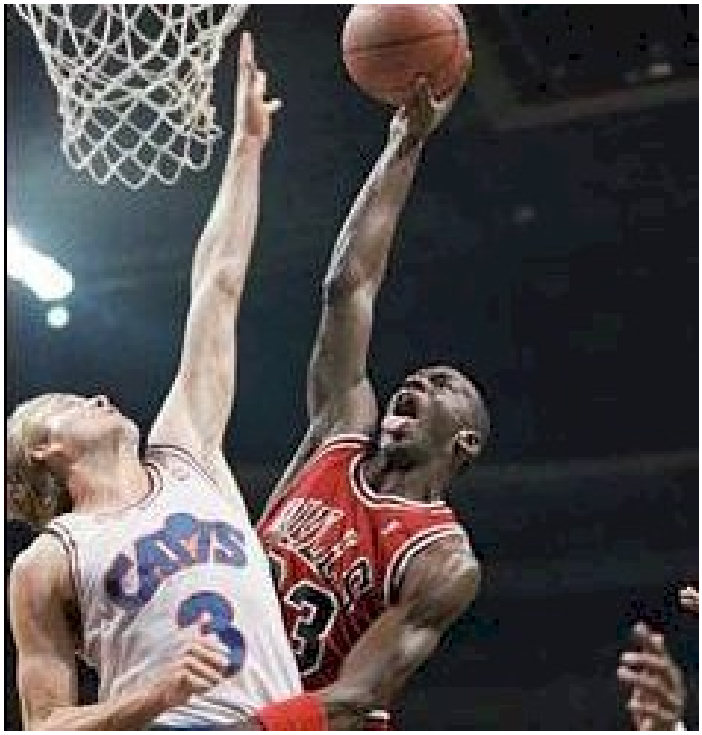


A lot of us who came of age as Cleveland sports fans in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s learned to love the game of basketball by watching the Cavaliers of that era. With their crisp, unselfish style, a lineup of solid citizens that played the game the right way and the shrewd, cerebral Lenny Wilkens calling the plays, those Cavaliers were easy to root for.

They never won a Championship, though, in large part because one towering figure stood directly astride their path. That figure was Michael Jordan. That in itself wasn’t a “Cleveland thing”- after all, the NBA graveyard is filled with the tombstones of great players and teams that never got a ring because of Jordan and his Bulls. But coming up at the same time and in the same division as the Bulls, Cleveland was at the business end of the Chicago dynasty more than any other team. They got it first, most and hardest.

In 1992 the Cavaliers went as far as they’d ever gotten in the Playoffs- all the way to the Eastern Conference Finals. There they met their nemesis from Chicago in a memorable six-game series that would prove to be the high-water mark of those Cleveland teams. This is the story of that series, and those two weeks in May.

Two Teams, Two Destinies

In the late ‘80s, while the Lakers, Celtics and Pistons dominated the NBA of today, a pair of teams seemed destined to dominate the NBA of tomorrow. The Chicago Bulls were led by the transcendent Michael Jordan- already considered one of the all-time greats at the tender age of 25- and two youthful sidekicks in Scottie Pippen and Horace Grant. The Cleveland Cavaliers, with their young core of Mark Price, Ron Harper and Brad Daugherty and veteran leaper Larry Nance, were so promising on paper that no less an authority on dynasties than Magic Johnson christened them “the team of the ‘90s.”

Problem was both of these talented young teams were in the same division, the Central, a division already owned lock, stock and barrel by the physical, savvy Bad Boys of Detroit. Chicago and Cleveland had to go through one another before either could challenge the Pistons. Sure enough, the Bulls and Cavaliers met in the first round of the 1988 and ’89 playoffs. Both series went the full five games, and the results would set the tone for each team’s course in the coming decade.

The 1989 series would prove especially crucial. Cleveland had seemingly zipped by the Bulls during the regular season, winning 57 games to Chicago’s 47 and sweeping the six games between the teams. But the playoffs were a different story. Chicago took Game One at the Coliseum, putting the Cavaliers on their heels, and from there the series went tit-for-tat. The Bulls put the Cavaliers on the brink of elimination with a Game Three win at Chicago Stadium, only to see Cleveland steal an overtime decision in Game Four. Game Five was a thriller, with the lead changing hands eight times in the final two-and-a-half minutes. But the last lead change belonged to Chicago, as Michael Jordan hit the buzzer-beating jumper that would become known to history simply as “The Shot.”

That play triggered a divergence in the paths of the Bulls and Cavaliers. Chicago went on to the Eastern Conference Finals in 1989 and ’90, falling to Detroit both times. By 1991 the Bulls were finally ready to take command of the NBA. They won 61 games during the regular season, vanquished the Pistons in four straight in the East Finals and brushed aside the Lakers in the NBA Finals, hoisting the franchise’s first World Championship banner. By 1992 the Bulls were the undisputed titans of the league, winners of 67 games and possessors of the league’s most feared player in Michael Jordan. They were the team of teams.

The Cavaliers, meanwhile, went south. Hampered by injuries, poor drafts and ill-advised personnel moves- the most infamous being the trade of Ron Harper to the Clippers for Danny Ferry- Cleveland sagged back into the pack in the first two seasons of the ‘90s. The Cavaliers fell completely off the map in 1990-91, winning just 33 games as Mark Price spent most of the season on the shelf with a career-threatening knee injury. The “team of the ‘90s” tag was long

forgotten, transferred to the nemesis by Lake Michigan and its tongue-wagging superstar.

Forgotten also was Cleveland's domination of the Bulls in the 1988-89 regular season. Starting with "The Shot," Chicago took thirteen straight from the Cavaliers, including Jordan's 69-point explosion on March 28, 1990. No longer were Cleveland and Chicago arch-rivals dueling for future supremacy in the Central Division and the NBA. The Cavaliers had become a hapless punching bag, earth-bound foils for Michael and his airborne exploits.

Setting the Stage

By 1991-92, however, Cleveland was finally ready to climb off the mat and assume the role of NBA title contender that had once seemed to be its destiny. After a 1-4 start the Cavaliers took off, bolstered by the return of Mark Price to his familiar role as team quarterback. A streak in December and January, punctuated by an NBA-record 68-point rout of Miami, provided the fuel that pushed Cleveland into the league's elite. With Price, Daugherty and Nance enjoying stellar seasons and Craig Ehlo and Hot Rod Williams providing solid support the Cavaliers finished 57-25, tied with Portland for the second-best record in the NBA.

But it wasn't nearly enough to overtake Chicago in the Central Division. Cleveland finished a distant ten games in arrears of Phil Jackson's Bulls, who went 67-15 behind Jordan, the

league's Most Valuable Player. With Michael being Michael, Scottie Pippen exploding into stardom and a deep, talented and physical supporting cast, Chicago looked even better than they had the previous season when they went 15-2 in the postseason and won the title in a romp. No one in the East looked ready to challenge the Bulls- least of all Cleveland, which hadn't even made it out of the first round of the playoffs since the Miracle year of 1976.

After sweeping overmatched Miami in the first round the Bulls rolled into the East Semifinals against the New York Knicks, who had been rejuvenated by first-year coach Pat Riley. Aside from Cleveland no team had been tormented more by Michael Jordan than New York. The Knicks had lost fourteen straight to Chicago, including a 3-0 wipeout in the first round of the '91 playoffs, and were expected to receive the same treatment at the hands of the Bulls in 1992.

But New York had a surprise in store for the Second City. Pounding away at MJ and Company with ferocious physical play, the Knicks stole Game One from the Bulls at Chicago Stadium, setting the stage for one of the most bruising, battering series in memory. For six straight games New York held Chicago under one hundred points, going right at the favored Bulls with flying elbows, forearm shivers and flapping jaws. Pat Riley's team shattered Chicago's myth of invincibility. Finally, in Game Seven, the Bulls asserted themselves. With Jordan scoring 42 points the Bulls put away the feisty Knicks with a 110-81 thrashing.

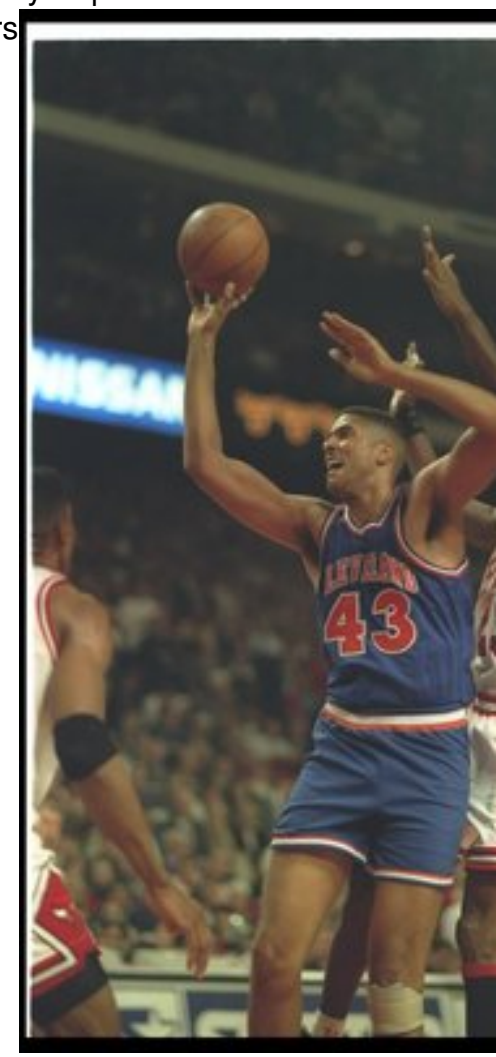
Over on the other side of the bracket the Cavaliers were exorcising demons. After six consecutive first-round losses Cleveland finally advanced, overcoming the talented New Jersey Nets in four games behind the sensational play of Brad Daugherty, who put together a line for the ages in Game One- 40 points, 16 rebounds and nine assists. The Cavaliers would face the Boston Celtics in the second round. Boston was an intriguing mix of young and old, with stalwarts Larry Bird, Kevin McHale and Robert Parish combining with youngsters Reggie Lewis, Kevin Gamble and Dee Brown to form an imposing foe.

It turned out to be a superb seven-game battle. Cleveland started fast with a 101-76 Game One blowout, Brad Daugherty scorching the Celts with 26 points and 17 rebounds. With Reggie Lewis bombing away Boston took the next two and seemed on the verge of taking command of the series. But Cleveland squared things in Game Four at the Garden, winning in overtime behind a 32-point effort from Larry Nance. The teams then traded blowouts, Cleveland winning Game Five by sixteen and the Celtics taking Game Six by 31, with Larry Bird racking up 16 points and 14 assists in his final game at Boston Garden.

It all came down to Game Seven- and on the gorgeous Sunday afternoon of May 17, 1992, in front of a deafening crowd at the Coliseum, the Cavaliers were absolutely sensational. They shot 59 percent, dished out an unbelievable 42 assists and put six players in double figures as they wiped out Boston, 122-104. It was perhaps the best single-game performance in franchise history- and it put Cleveland in the Eastern Conference Finals for the first time since 1976. The Cavaliers would face their old tormentors from Chicago with the right to go to the NBA Finals on the line.

Marshmallows No More

Chicago didn't exactly quake with anxiety over the prospect. The big city's sportswriters competed with one another for creative ways to describe the Cavaliers



as "soft." After the seven-game war with New York no one along the shores of Lake Michigan

envisioned a similar challenge from Cleveland. Nor, for that matter, did anyone else. After all, these were the Bulls- the world's most famous team with the world's most iconic player, a squad with two members- Jordan and Pippen- that would lace them up for the Dream Team at the Olympics in Barcelona that summer. The Cavaliers hadn't even made a national television appearance that season. This series would be a mere appetizer for Chicago's eagerly anticipated Finals match-up with the Trail Blazers. Or, so went the conventional thinking.

And the conventional thinking ruled the day in Game One at Chicago Stadium. So did the Bulls. The defending Champions took the lead for good barely four minutes in and were never headed, coasting home with an easy 103-89 decision. Jordan had his usual output with 33 while Pippen was downright monstrous with 29 points, 12 rebounds, nine assists and three blocked shots. Chicago hit all 19 of its free throws and out-rebounded the Cavaliers, 45-38. Cleveland's one edge was in the pivot where Brad Daugherty matched up with Bill Cartwright, yet the Cavaliers seemed content to launch jumpers as Chicago pulled away. It was a flat, feeble performance and it seemed to confirm every pejorative launched at the Cavaliers in the previous two days.

Accordingly the Second City writers were brutal in victory- none more so than *Sun-Times* columnist Jay Mariotti, who ripped into the visitors in a piece entitled, "Polite Cavaliers Too Nice to Stand Chance vs. Bulls." To Mariotti the Cavaliers were "marshmallows," "creampuffs" that "had a deep-rooted psychological hang-up about the Bulls" dating back to the Shot. They were "a friendly team with a friendly coach," which wasn't a compliment. "The air," Mariotti yawned, "has been let out of a juicy postseason." This series wasn't just going to be easy- it was going to be *too* easy. The least the Cavaliers could do was make Chicago break a sweat before the Finals.

To be sure, the Cavaliers *did* have a reputation as a soft team- an image exemplified by the cherubic Mark Price, who sang in his church choir and could play forty minutes of NBA basketball without a single strand of his brown coif falling out of place. In reality Cleveland played more of a "Western Conference" style- free-flowing, finesse and ball-movement- than an "Eastern Conference" style, which was bruising, physical and defensive-oriented. The Cavaliers relied on the best passing lineup in the game for offense and the shot-blocking of Larry Nance and Hot Rod Williams for defense. They weren't the Knicks, nor did they try to be. "You have to play the way you play," Lenny Wilkens responded when asked why his team didn't rip a page from Pat Riley's book.

That way didn't look like the right way to even test the World Champions. And on May 21, 1992, more than 18,000 fans filed confidently into aging Chicago Stadium to see their heroes take the

inevitable 2-0 series lead. They would witness one of the most stunning turns of events in the history of either franchise.

Chicago came out and missed its first attempt from the field. And its second… and its third… and its fourth. In all the Bulls failed on their first thirteen shots, didn't score a point in the first four minutes and didn't hit a field goal in the first eight-plus minutes. By then it was 20-6. When Hot Rod Williams went baseline and crammed home a reverse jam in Scottie Pippen's face it was 28-9 in favor of the Cavaliers- and the marshmallows were just starting to toast. When the lead grew to 21 early in the second period boos began to filter through Chicago Stadium. By halftime, with Cleveland leading 59-33, the booing had stopped. The crowd was too stunned to be angry.

The final score was Cleveland 107, Chicago 81. Daugherty, enjoying a brilliant postseason thus far, poured in 28 with nine rebounds and four assists, demolishing every big man Phil Jackson threw against him. Price hit 4-of-5 from three-point range and finished with 23 points and seven assists. Jordan and Pippen combined to shoot 11-of-36, with His Airness not hitting a field goal until early in the second quarter. In suffering the third-worst home playoff defeat of Phil Jackson's illustrious career the Bulls shot 37 percent and committed 19 turnovers. Suddenly a series that was expected to be a walk for Chicago was tied at one apiece.

The Series Moves East

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