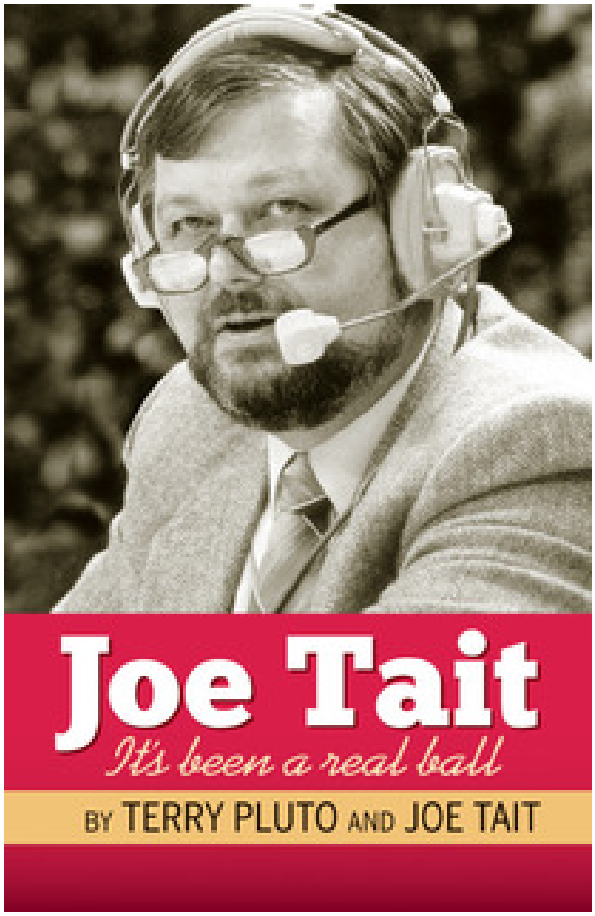

I had the opportunity to interview recently retired Cavaliers radio play-by-play announcer Joe Tait on Thursday. We talked about the state of the NBA, Cavaliers day of lore, the future of broadcasting and trains. Joe Tait is the subject of the book "Joe Tait: It's Been a Real Ball" by Terry Pluto.

Demetri: Which Cavs team had the tightest bond amongst teammates?

JT: "There were two teams. The Miracle of Richfield ball club thanks to Nate Thurmond for the way he brought that team together. The Brad Daugherty, Larry Nance, Mark Price, "Hot Rod" Williams team was a whole bunch of guys who liked each other a lot and Lenny Wilkens as their head coach was their final bit of adhesiveness. Those two were the best."

Demetri: Do you think the Cavs will consider retiring Lenny WIlkens' number?

JT: ""Probably not. No, I don't think so. He didn't play with us that long. Granted, he played with us about as long as Nate Thurmond but his impact came in the Miracle year and was much more profound. Lenny was the first legitimate basketball player that we had. He was a trailblazer for the Cavaliers and he was there in a time when the Cavs were trying to get their sea legs."

Demetri: You repeatedly made mention in "It's Been a Real Ball" that the Cavs should retire World B. Free's number. Is this something you foresee in the future of the franchise?

JT: "He pulled that franchise out of the mush. When Ted Stepien left, "World" was the one thing that the Cavs had that still attracted the fans. I don't know what his problems were with other franchises, but I do know this he was the best we had to offer. He was a fan favorite and worked hard at being a fan favorite."

Demetri: What is the most surprising Cavs trade that you ever saw?

JT: "I can't say that any one trade leaps right off the page. The most disturbing trade in history was the Ron Harper with Danny Ferry trade but there were a lot of extenuating circumstances with that one."

Demetri: Do you think the Cavs could have gotten past the Bulls had they not made that trade?

JT: "Michael Jordan would be the first guy to tell you that with Ron Harper, the Cavs would have had a very good shot at winning at least one championship."

Demetri: How close do you think the Mike Brown and LeBron James era Cavs were to

winning a championship?

JT: “Not that close. I don’t think they had enough leadership to get the job done. LeBron was a great athlete. I should say 'is', but he did not have the leadership skills to lead the team and we didn’t have anybody else who could fill that role.”

Demetri: Would the NBA have been able to survive a year-long lockout?

JT: “Oh yeah, in fact it might have survived better than what they are going to have. I know nothing of what the new agreement says or doesn’t say. It could have survived a year off. It’s nothing against the Cavs. Byron Scott is a tremendous coach. I’ve closed the door and will now move onto other things.”

Demetri: Is the current atmosphere in the NBA that different than it was in the past? Do you think things are more or less the same but magnified by social media and the 24 hour news cycle?

JT: “Absolutely, sure. Back when I came into the league in 1970, there was no ESPN or any of those other things. Computers? forget it. There wasn't any of that stuff. Now, everyone who can get on the internet can call themselves an 'expert' and go off and have a grand old time. The other thing that has changed a lot is the money. Back in the old days, in the early 70’s, in the springtime before the end of the season, you rode a bus to the airport to ride commercial planes and you heard conversations like, ‘I loaded furniture for my uncle last summer' and 'I am looking for a summer job.’ After the big bucks, it turned into ‘my camp is in June and then there’s the league meetings in Maui.’ It’s an entirely different world.”

Demetri: What do you think would happen if the NBA chose to ditch the “full game experience”?

JT: “If the team won the majority of the games, people would come and have a great time. If the team lost they wouldn’t come. In spite of the theories that abound in marketing and promotion, winning is everything. You win, you draw. You don’t win, you don’t draw.”

Demetri: Which arena would you say has the most traditional production during NBA games?

JT: "The Lakers at least keep it to a dull roar. Boston was the last team to actually surrender to a mascot and a dance team and that was only because Red Aurbach passed away.

Demetri: Can you tell me about working with Terry Pluto? How important was it that he was the author of "It's Been a real ball"?

JT: "Well, I would say the best way to put it is that he was the only person that I would have considered as an author for this book. If I was going to do it he was going to do the heavy work and he did it quite well.

Demetri: What is the future of radio play-by-play?

JT: "I think we are going to wake up one of these days and discover that there isn't radio play-by-play. There will be play-by-play but it will be on the internet and I'll never hear it because I don't have a computer and don't intend to get one. It will be a lot a lost medium to me when that happens."

Demetri: I have listened to your broadcasts for many years and have always been impressed with how objective you are in your analysis. Is this something that you had to work towards or did it come naturally to you?

JT: "Well, I would probably have to say in all honesty that in the early days with the Cavaliers, I was little more one-sided than I have become over the years. I always believed in letting the other guy on the other team have his just due if he did something that deserved the accolades. I was probably a bit more of a homer in the early days when the Cavaliers rarely won."

Demetri: Do you prefer high school and college sports to professional leagues?

JT: “Certainly now more than ever. I continue to do Mount Union football on cable TV and I definitely have no problem stepping away from professional sports. Period. Chris Paul made his way to the Lakers*. The inmates are running the asylum. I haven’t read one word of that since the end of the season. Before today, I didn’t know that Chris Paul was talking about LA or anywhere else for that matter.”

Demetri: What are you plans for retirement?

JT: “Just to enjoy home, enjoy the company of my wife and relax a little bit. We have a lot of stuff that has accumulated that needs to be sorted out. Some of it dispatched, some of it put aside. That is one of the current tasks. Sit back and relax. Neither one of us want to travel so we are happy to be where we are and stay where we are.”

Demetri: What piqued your interest in trains?

JT: “Most of my family in the past on both sides, mother and father, were involved with railroading. My dad used to take me to the railroad depot in Aurora, IL and introduce me to various family members. My dad went to Edinburgh, Scotland and you can go all the way back to one of my ancestors who helped build the first locomotive. I’ve had it in my blood for a long, long time.”

Demetri: What is the best train route in the tri-state area?

JT: “I’ve gone from Cleveland to Chicago a number of times. It’s not the easiest thing in the world thing to do because Amtrack sends most of the trains in Cleveland through random hours. The Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad is beautiful ride. They’ve extended it all the way down to Canton. The Midwest Railway Preservation Society stages a ride from Medina to Akron to Canton to Brewster and back to Spencer that’s a nice ride that I’ve enjoyed several times. Denver to Salt Lake City is a great ride. You go along the Colorado River for a couple hundred miles and you rarely see a road at all, but you see a lot of wild life. i’ve been eyeball-to-eyeball

with an eagle sitting on a telegraph pole.

Demetri: Do you have a favorite season for taking trips on trains?

JT: “No. When I was working the Indians and the Cavs, Herb Score and I used to ride the train from Baltimore to New York City and New York City to Boston. We would beat the team to the hotel and we always got there before they did by going via train. I take the opportunity to ride the train whenever I can.”

*Because Tait does not keep up with current NBA events, I informed him of the Chris Paul trade news which was later reneged.

The Book “Joe Tait: It’s Been a Real Ball” can be purchased from Grayco.com , Amazon.com ,

BN.com
and independent booksellers.

For book signing dates, free excerpts and more information visit www.joetaitbook.com .