**Pay Close Attention**

If you're interested in little things like possible championship chances, LeBron James' future plans and the overall well-being and future of the local NBA franchise this is going to be kind of a big week for the Cleveland Cavaliers.

The NBA trade deadline is Thursday of this week and the Cavs have gone from kicking the tires on a few potential additions like Antawn Jamison, Troy Murphy and Andre Iguodala to the point where credit checks and serious negotiations are now apparently taking place that would bring Amare Stoudemire to Cleveland.

Reports all over the internet have the Cavs and the Suns in serious discussions to send the 27-year old perennial All-Star power forward to the Cavaliers in exchange for J.J. Hickson and Zydrunas Ilgauskas.

Stoudemire, in Dallas this weekend representing Phoenix, is averaging better than 21 points per game and nearly nine rebounds and is generally regarded as one of the game's best power forwards.

Stoudemire lacks the three point ability that Jamison and Murphy exhibit but he is an effective shooter out to 20 feet or so. In fact, a 55% shooter overall because of his ability near the basket, Stoudemire shoots an impressive 45% from 16-20feet according to HoopData.com.

A healthy, interested and motivated Stoudemire may very well be the ideal ‘stretch 4' that the Cavs are seeking.

This, however, is not a deal without some potential downside.

Stoudemire and Shaquille O'Neal didn't exactly mesh well last season in Phoenix. It would be hard to assume Shaq wasn't heavily consulted when this deal was discussed internally though, and that O'Neal likely gave his blessing. Stoudemire also makes $17million this season and has an option for the same amount for next season. That means he has all the leverage as to whether he signs on for another season (or more) in Cleveland or he chooses to test the market and sign elsewhere, making him an expensive (in terms of losing Hickson) three month rental.

All indications right now are that Suns GM Steve Kerr (a close friend of Cavs' GM Danny Ferry, not incidentally) would likely renounce Ilgauskas once the deal is done, thus enabling Z to return to the Cavs after 30 days. That makes the deal, in essence, Hickson and cap relief to Phoenix for Stoudemire.

I'm torn on the deal specifically because of the potential that Stoudemire walks away after this season. While I'm not overly impressed with Hickson because I believe his output is a direct function of James and O'Neal opening the court for him, I'd still not prefer to lose J.J. and his upside for three months of Stoudemire. I'm also torn because this team as it stands now is good enough to win a title. Orlando's advantage because of Howard has been neutralized because of

Shaq and the team as it's currently compiled can play effectively against any style.

Am I torn about it enough not to make the deal? No. I'd swallow hard and pull the trigger only because this is a crucial season for the Cavs not only in terms of possibly winning a title, but because James' contract situation is the elephant in the room at all times. Stoudemire is clearly an upgrade over Hickson at this point and adding Amare would stretch the gap between the Cavs and their closest competitors even further.

And despite obvious reasons here to fear for the worst, the prospects of James, Stoudemire, another year or two of O'Neal at a reduced rate as well as Mo Williams, Delonte West and some of the other young talent the Cavs have acquired being here for years to come gets me giddy thinking about a potential extended run of excellence on the north coast.

Still, there is plenty of time between now and Thursday. When I first heard of the renewed interest in Stoudemire the first thing I posted was that it might well be an attempt to lower the asking prices on guys like Jamison and Murphy. Those guys would just be a more of a natural, less intrusive fit with the Cavaliers.

But make no mistake, whatever happens between now and the deadline will have an effect on this franchise for potentially years to come.

**The All-Star Game?**

I don't know much about it. I watched introductions that took longer than an SAT test and then watched full court sprints to the rim for each side for 15 minutes and decided Olympic coverage was more engaging. I would assume there were plenty of lobs, dunks, errant behind-the-back passes and a large amount of clowning around.

I hear Shakira won the MVP award though.

## Buckeyes Blistering

Ohio State notched their 20th win of the season Sunday against the previously streaking Illinois Fighting Illini. That the 16th ranked Buckeyes did it in Champaign was even more impressive.

The Buckeyes jumped on Illinois early and often with a barrage of three pointers and Jon Diebler was the biggest culprit as far as the Illini were concerned. Diebler finished the game going 6-11 from beyond the arc for his 18 points. The Buckeyes took a 16-point lead into the locker room at halftime and Illinois never seriously threatened OSU after intermission.

The win was Ohio State's 9th straight in Big10 play following a mid-week win against a struggling Indiana club Wednesday.

OSU is seriously heating it up as they head down the stretch. They do have a couple rough weeks left in the Big10 season with a Wednesday game this week against Purdue and an away game with co-conference leader Michigan State looming in a couple of weeks. But if the Buckeyes can win a few more Big10 games and make a nice showing in the conference tourney, their record and the specter of National Player of the Year candidate Evan Turner might squeeze them into a 3rd seed at worst and possibly a two seed.

## Springing Into Shape

Pitchers and catchers report to Goodyear, AZ next Sunday. You should be able to tell them apart by the fact the catchers on this roster are the guys that can actually throw.

You know what kind of year you're looking at when you're hoping Jake Westbrook is healthy and effective. Not so that he'll be able to anchor your rotation as the ace of the staff, but rather so you can spin him for a nice long-range prospect or two in July when a contender needs a 3rd or 4th starter.