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LeBron James; Billy Donovan

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
LeBron James; Billy Donovan
JUNE 2, 2007

In less than twenty-four hours, between Thursday night and Friday morning, the NBA produced two major stories. One concerned the essence of sport, the other the distorted values of modern sport. I am writing about the performance by LeBron James against the Detroit Pistons in game five of their Eastern Conference final and about the signing of Billy Donovan as the new coach of the Orlando Magic for over five million dollars a year. Both are jaw dropping performances in their own right, but that by James represents sport and the one by the Magic represents commerce and its twisted representation in sport.

I have been watching NBA basketball since the Lakers were in Minneapolis. I have seen many great performances over the years by George Mikan, Elgin Baylor, Bob Pettit, Bill Russell, Bob Cousy, Wilt, Kareem, Larry, Magic and Michael, but I cannot recall any that were any more amazing than the performance by LeBron James Thursday night at the Palace against the Pistons.

It is said that the great players prove their greatness by taking their team on their shoulders and carrying them to victory in the truly significant games. They perform at an extremely high level and will their team to victory. This is a perfect description of James' night. The Cleveland Cavaliers entered the game tied in the series at two games each and had not won a game in the Motor City. They would need to win at least one if they were to have a chance to win the series.

In the fourth quarter the Cavs were trailing. Beginning in that quarter, and proceeding through two overtime periods, James scored the final twenty-five points made by his team and twenty-nine of the last thirty. Drew Gooden contributed the one free-throw. LeBron also had seven of his team's thirteen assists.

Repeatedly James made shots that pulled the Cavs close, tied the game, or put them ahead. It wasn't just the points that were made, but how they were made. There were three-point shots from out front and from an angle. There were shorter jump shots from several places on the floor. There were drives to the basket producing dunks and foul shots. The drives were to the left and to the right, and at times both. The shots were taken with players hanging on him, with little or no time or space, and yet he got the shots off and they rattled in.

When it was over the Pistons were beaten, the Cavs were amazed, the crowd was stunned, and James was exhausted. "He left it all out on the court" as they say, and then some.

For those who saw this performance they saw the essence of sport. James displayed talent, will, creativity of thought and shot, and put the beauty of the game of basketball on full display. If you saw it, count yourself among the fortunate, especially in this time when most of the headlines seem to be outside the arena.

As the game came to its magnificent conclusion, the first reports that Billy Donovan was leaving the University of Florida to become head coach of the Orlando Magic were circulating. The stories were confirmed by morning and at 11 a.m. in Orlando a press conference was held to make the formal introduction of the new coach. It was a moment like no other in the franchise history since the departure of Shaq for Los Angeles. Ever since watching Billy Donovan take the Florida Gators to back to back national championships, the basketball fans of Central Florida were dreaming of the day when he would become the Magic coach. No one really believed it would be this soon.

Exactly why Donovan took this job is a mystery, although there are any number of theories. Was it the money? Certainly the Magic spared no expense, but nor had Kentucky, and that had not sent Billy off to Lexington. Was it the challenge of "winning at the next level"? This seems to have played some role in the decision making process as Donovan explained it.

Was it the fact that basketball will always be the number two sport at the University of Florida? This would not have changed even if Donovan led the Gators to seven straight NCAA titles. Football is king in Gainesville and Urban is Pope. If this were the case it would not be the first time coaches have changed jobs for such a reason. Bear Bryant's departure from Kentucky for Alabama was in some part influenced by the fact that basketball reigned in the Bluegrass State and Adolf Rupp would always dominate the athletic department at UK. Billy Donovan is a relatively young coach at age forty-two and he may not have relished the thought of spending the next two or three decades in the shadow of the football team and its coach.

Whatever the reasons, the fact that someone would be paid over five million dollars to coach a basketball team in the NBA, having never before coached at that level, is a sign of the madness that grips modern sport. The truth is that no one comes

to the games to watch a coach, and no coach ever put up thirty points in a winning cause.

And what of the top recruits that Donovan lured to Florida over the past few months? By all measures it was a stellar class. Will the Gators do the right thing and release them to transfer to other schools and play for other coaches? Don't count on it. In college basketball only coaches get the big money, and only coaches can jump ship at any time.

In the face of the events of the past couple of days it is better to concentrate on the player rather than the coach. It is in the performance of the player that we see the essence of sport. The highest level of performance that each athlete strives to attain can only be found in the actions of the athlete, and that after all is the appeal of sport as it offers a glimpse of the best that the human spirit can offer.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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