Who I am

By Jason Friedman

I am your average run of the mill sports fan who was incredibly moved by Richard’s Jefferson’s words. I encourage other Cavs fans to share their stories of what this journey has meant for them to inspire the players as they prepare for the most important game in Cleveland sports history on Sunday.

To me each basketball game is a story. To understand the components within each game you need to take a look at the past, present and future events that go into each narrative. Here is my story:

Basketball was the first sport that peaked my interest as a child, much to my father’s dismay who not so secretly hoped it would be baseball. I grew up in the era of Jordan. I wanted to be like Mike, heck everyone I knew wanted to be him. Shortly after he retired so too did my interest in basketball. I turned to baseball for the next bunch of years watching the Indians turn into perennial World Series contenders and worked on my skills of trying to develop as a player myself.

Next I take you to a magical day in 2002. We had heard about this basketball phenom who was a junior in high school playing at a school called St. Vincent St. Mary, you might have heard of it. I was lucky enough to be able to get tickets to one of his games in the Cleveland area and will never forget what I had the privilege of watching on that day. From the tip off I knew I was watching something special, but never anticipated that it would take me on a roller coaster ride over the next decade and a half into my adulthood. I saw a player in LeBron that could have easily gone out each and every night and drop 100 points. What stood out to me wasn’t the MJ-like tenacity. It was something even more breathtaking, the ability to bring out the best in each and every player around him. That was something far more powerful then the statistics and numbers he put up. My love for basketball was renewed and I wanted to see more of this man they called the chosen one. I was at the Gund Arena for the McDonald’s All-American game featuring LeBron. One play that I witnessed sums up what I admire the most. LeBron was nonchalantly dribbling the ball up court then all of a sudden throws the ball towards the hoop. My instinct said, “what the heck is he thinking?” Then a sprinting Charlie Villanueva jumps in the air to grab the alley oop and slams it down. This play symbolized his vision, instinct and will to make those around him great.

One of the most memorable days of my life came in 2003. I had long since hung up my basketball shoes after making the C team in middle school but continued playing baseball. I had just pitched well for the first time all year and went to visit my girlfriend at the time and now wife working at a kiosk at Beachwood Place Mall. We started talking and I look up to see LeBron casually walk by. I stupidly asked her if she knew who that was and told her that he is going to take the Cavs and the world of basketball to a new level one day. I looked for anything that me might be able to autograph and quickly grabbed a blank white piece of paper and black pen. I walked up and timidly asked, “Mr. James, can I have your autograph?” He paused, politely obliged my request, and to this day that blank white piece of paper is my most prized possession.

Flash forward to the next 7 years and we know how that plays out. A great deal of hope but in the end heartbreak. On the night of “the decision” I was in Chicago attending graduate school and went to watch the broadcast with a few friends wearing my favorite LeBron MVP chalk toss shirt. So many mixed emotions were felt after he spoke those infamous words. Everyone around me wrote him off. I couldn’t. I thought to myself if not for him I would not even care much about the game of basketball. So my allegiance swayed to LeBron’s new team, the Miami Heat. We know what occurred over the next 4 years. During his final year my gut and heart told me he was coming to make a return. Then on July 11, 2014 I was moved by LeBron’s words in his new decision to take his talents back to northeast Ohio.

Last season was magical. It was truly a Hollywood story but ultimately ended with a sad ending. However, the city was alive and Cleveland fans had hope. My favorite story from this season involved my two and a half year old son. I was watching game 4 of the Eastern Conference Finals and he was up late with me. After yet another missed shot I looked down and shook my head. He looked at me, smiled and said, “come on basketball.” I think of those words before each and every game. He has a medical condition that makes his work of breathing more difficult. Each and every day he helps me learn something about myself and about life. Like LeBron, he inspires me every day to be the best person I can. In a way his story mirrors my narrative as a sports fan. I hope as he gets older that he is able to enjoy and appreciate the game and LeBron the way I do. Sure he will be captivated by his unworldly talents and hopefully strive to be like LeBron. To me, I hope that means that he expects the best from himself and brings out greatness in others.