

LeBron's Midlife Crisis

The midlife crisis is well publicized within popular American culture. Although the particulars can differ from person to person, the fundamental pattern has more or less remained the same. The narrative typically goes something like this: a person (most commonly a man) entering their middle years suddenly becomes disenchanted with their life and starts to slip into a mire of strange decisions and patterns of behavior. A stagnant work life or marriage amidst the pressures of finances, kids, and a struggle for a meaningful identity usually act as triggers that set off a series of bizarre decisions and behaviors. An extramarital affair, the purchase of a sports car or motorcycle, or the pursuit of a strange new hobby are a few things that have become synonymous with the American notion of a midlife crisis.

The fame and fortune that comes with being the best basketball player on the planet may lead us to believe that LeBron would be insulated from this type of affliction. Yet, I would argue that LeBron James is NOT only privy to experiencing such a crisis, but is in the middle of a personal crisis at this very moment. Here are the reasons why.

Career Transition

LeBron's last 4 years in Miami brought his two NBA championships and 2 MVP awards while taking the Heat to 4 consecutive Finals series. He has admitted that in many ways his time in Miami was like him going to college. It was a time of growth, maturity, and learning that tested and forced him to grow into the player he is today. He had the opportunity to play with other all-star players in Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh, while working for one of the greatest basketball minds of all time in Pat Riley.

As Wade physically started to decline, he eventually yielded his alpha dog status to LeBron, who became the unquestioned leader of the team. It is important to note here that LeBron had true peers in Wade, Bosh, and Riley that were able to challenge and push him to grow into one of the greatest players of all time. The presence of other high capacity leaders forced

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LeBron to grow in ways that he was unable to in his first 7 years in Cleveland.

After the Spurs dismantled the Heat in the 2014 NBA finals, LeBron made the decision to leave the Heat and return to the Cleveland Cavaliers. The situation he walked into was drastically different in many respects. The Cavs hired a rookie coach in David Blatt, the two other best players (Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love) on the team are younger than LeBron and have no experience playing for a winning team. The rest of the players on the team are either role players or still finding their way in the league. LeBron returned to a Cleveland team that had no true peers to come alongside him and help lead the franchise. The burden is squarely on his shoulders. Anyone that has had a major change in their work environment understands the difficulty that can come with the meshing of new personalities and the development of trust between coworkers. LeBron has alluded to the difficulty of finding chemistry with his new teammates, which has manifested itself into some less than positive body language on the court.

Although LeBron has said that this would be one of the greatest challenges of his career, his words and body language suggest that he has not enjoyed the process of building a winning culture with this group of players. I suspect that LeBron has bitten off more than he can chew in by trying to act as the GM, coach, and superstar for his hometown franchise. It is evident that he has felt the pressure of this increased responsibility and has failed so far to deliver on his promise to bring championship basketball back to the city of Cleveland. The next several months will show us how LeBron plans to navigate these challenges and if his time in Miami has developed his leadership capacity to the point where he can help guide this group of players to a championship.

The primary question moving forward is whether LeBron has the character to pour himself into these younger players in an attempt to build something special, or will he continue to lead at an arms length by making passive aggressive quotes to the media and talking in belittling terms about how much his teammates still have to learn. His attitude has been one of a cranky old grandfather who has tired of the younger generations way of life. If this team has any chance of challenging for an Eastern Conference title, LeBron is the one who has to set the tone. His tone needs to change from a "me" centred approach to a "we" approach. He must do this without belittling his younger compatriots, but rather needs to approach them with respect, patience, and understanding. All-star caliber players like Kyrie and

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Love need to feel respected and part of the process if they're going to buy into this narrative.

Transforming his Game

LeBron has averaged playing 40 minutes per game during the regular season throughout his career, and 42 minutes in the playoffs. Combined he has played 39,993 minutes through the first 11 years of his career. By comparison, Kobe Bryant played 33,464 minutes in the first 11 years, averaging 36.2 mpg in the regular season and 38.8 mpg in the playoffs. In essence by the same point in their careers, LeBron has played an extra 136 full NBA 48 minutes games, which is the equivalent to a little more than an extra season and a half of games during the same stretch. The workload of minutes played and LeBron progressing in age has undoubtedly taken a toll on his explosiveness and ability to finish at the rim.

This season he has seen a decline in his shooting numbers per NBA.com. One of the most impressive stats of LeBron's career is that he has increased his shooting percentage from the field every single year of his career. Last year he shot a career high 56.7% from the field and converted 78.2% of his field goal attempts within 5 feet of the basket. Among players who attempted more than 7 field goal attempts per game in the restricted area, the next highest percentage was Blake Griffin at 69.4%, nearly a full 9% points lower than LeBron.

In contrast, this year LeBron is shooting 48.8% from the field, his lowest mark since the 2008-2009 season. He is shooting 65% on shots within 5 feet of the basket, almost a full 13% points lower than last year. This suggests that his explosiveness and ability to finish through bigger defenders at the rim has declined. We can reasonably assume that these numbers will pick up as the season progresses and he regains some of his health, but the numbers suggest that the athleticism LeBron has relied on for so long is starting to diminish.

As LeBron transitions into the latter half of his career, he will have to tweak parts of his game to take advantage of different parts of his skill set. There comes a time in every person's working life when they must add a new set of skills to adjust with the changing landscape of their professional life. This is such a time for LeBron. We will see in the coming months and years how he leverages his smarts, passing ability, and hoops IQ to transform parts of his game. The ability to which he can do this will determine the future of the

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Cleveland Cavs and the legacy by which we remember one of the greatest players of all time.

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