



by Kyle Stack / @NYSportswriter

The recent NBA free agency period didn't just teach us the effectiveness of players recruiting other players or the financial benefits of playing for a team in a state without an income tax. It didn't just show us how much money team owners are still willing to spend or how much some players value winning a title versus maximizing their financial options. It provided a glimpse of how quickly the public's perception of a player's brand can change.

Only a few months ago, LeBron James was largely the standard against which every other NBA player was measured. After the way he conducted himself during free agency, he's viewed by many people as a prime example of everything that's wrong with professional athletes. Which might not be fair if you consider the circumstances upon which he made his decision to join the Miami Heat.

In signing with the Heat, James made two concessions that sports fans typically deride athletes for ignoring: 1) He joined a team that already had great players in order to give himself the best chance of winning multiple championships, and 2) He took less money to do so.

Yet his choice of airing his future destination during an special hour-long show on ESPN, titled "The Decision," outraged people because of its brashness and insensitivity to the good folks of Cleveland, who watched their hero tell the country he would be playing elsewhere.

According to an SI.com poll which ran after James made it known that he would take his talents to South Beach, 65 percent of nearly 22,800 respondents selected James as "an egomaniac." Sixty-one percent of a similar number of voters within the same poll stated that although they once had a positive opinion of James, they had changed their mind about the two-time regular season MVP.

Bad as it seems now for James and his future marketing prospects, some say his critics will very likely come back and embrace him.

"I think [his disapproval] is a blip," said Ed O'Hara, Senior Partner at SME, a brand consultant firm in New York City. "Look, we forgave Tiger Woods, he's back in action. When LeBron wins, which he will do, his reputation and brand will be galvanized."

O'Hara stated fans tend to expect that athletes like LeBron James will be, in O'Hara's words, "narcissistic and a bit spoiled." Since it's what fans are trained to expect, no athlete will be dismissed for too long before he is yet again embraced. Woods is a fine example.

Despite all the detailed accounts since last November of Woods' numerous affairs while he was married, a recent poll from Harris Interactive named Woods America's Favorite Sports Star for the fifth straight year. He shared the top spot this year with Kobe Bryant, who you might recall has gone through his fair share of public

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relations nightmares, from his sexual assault case in 2003 to his back-and-forth trade demands in 2007.

James dropped to the sixth spot this year after finishing last year ranked third. "The Decison" didn't play a role in that ranking, however, as the 2,227-person survey was conducted from June 14-21, well before the July 8 airing of James' decision. In that case, James' inability to push the Cavaliers past the second round of this past postseason likely contributed to his lower ranking.

Winning will likely give James the shot-in-the-arm he'll need to regain his popularity. In a [June story](#) in this space, CNBC sports business reporter Darren Rovell mentioned to me that winning a championship was paramount to James' ability to make money off the court. Adding championships rings is what brings glamor to a player's reputation.

Now that James has teamed up with Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh on the Heat, his opportunity to win is as great as ever. And despite James turning away powerhouse cities such as New York and Chicago in favor of Miami, his new home city can still help his marketing potential.

"It's an international city," O'Hara said of Miami. "It's the gateway to America for many countries from the Caribbean rim to South America. Europeans go through there. That's going to bode well for the Heat brand and for the LeBron brand."

What fans will end up discovering is whether a player of James' stature can resuscitate his once stellar reputation by simply winning on the court. That's what James has left, as he's shown his true colors during free agency. Now he has to win, and if he does, perhaps he can restore his popularity just as fast as he lost it.

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*This is the first in a two-part series about the way NBA players branded themselves during free agency. The second part will appear Wednesday.*

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