



“What if?”

It’s the most Cleveland of questions. The Indians liked it so much they turned it into their advertising slogan for several years. But this year’s Cavaliers team might have every right to snatch that slogan for themselves.

Perhaps no team in the NBA presently has a bigger factor of variables than the Cavs. We know the Heat, barring a catastrophic injury to LeBron James, are going to be the league’s best team. We’re almost certain the 76ers are going to be the league’s worst team, fronting the Andrew Wiggins lottery derby in 2014.

But the Cavs? They could fall just about anywhere in between.

What if Kyrie Irving takes the next step to superstardom? What if injuries limit him to fewer than 65 games again?

What if Andrew Bynum recovers to his 2011-12 form, when he had the best statistical season of his career? What if his knees can't keep him on the floor?

What if Andy Varejao once again flourishes in Mike Brown's defense? What if he keeps adding lines to his rapidly-lengthening injury history?

What if Dion Waiters really is Joe Dumars to Kyrie's Isiah Thomas? What if he's a chronic shot-chucker who consistently sabotages offensive possessions, and he never gets any better?

What if Tristan Thompson's right-handed shot doesn't work? What if it does? What if Anthony Bennett's recently-revealed sleep apnea and asthma caps his conditioning level, relegating him to a part-time role? What if Jarrett Jack starts to play like a 30-something? What if his veteran leadership is exactly what the doctor ordered? What if small forward is a black hole of non-productive suck all season long? What if Alonzo Gee really can become Cleveland's version of Bruce Bowen?

And what if Brown's offensive acumen hasn't improved since he last patrolled the sideline for the Cavs in 2010?

If the majority of those questions have positive answers, the Cavs could win upwards of 50 games and find themselves in the battle for a middle playoff seed in April. If the majority of those answers are bad news, the Cavs could be a 30-win team in the lottery hunt for the fourth straight year.

With the Cavs season set to tip off Wednesday night against the Brooklyn Nets at The Q, this is a closer look at what we know about the 2013-14 Cavs:

Starters

PG Kyrie Irving: When the media starts talking about Kyrie needing to make the third-year leap, it's the height of praise. LeBron made the third-year leap in 2006 and took the Cavs to a hard-fought, second round exit against the Pistons in his first playoff appearance. Kevin Durant made the third-year leap for Oklahoma City in 2010. Chris Paul is a member of the third-year leap club. Now Kyrie has to do the same.

Kyrie has the goods to put himself on the outskirts of the MVP conversation in his third year. He's not unseating LeBron and Durant just yet, but he could make his presence felt. He has arguably the best handle in the league, a reliable outside shot and a knack for making incredible finishes in traffic. And if the preseason is any indication, he's already paying more attention to defense.

The one caveat with Kyrie is his body. Brittle bones and joints have already cost him significant chunks of his lone college season at Duke, and his first two NBA seasons. The injuries have been of a freak nature – nothing chronic or degenerative – but missed games are missed games. He has to stay on the floor for at least 70 games this year if the Cavs are to make significant progress.

SG Dion Waiters: His offensive talent is undeniable. Despite being a controversial No. 4 pick in 2012, he finished second among rookies in scoring last year. The problem with Waiters is harnessing that talent.

Waiters doesn't have the best basketball instincts. He tends to hoist up the kind of jump shots that wreck possessions. But he appears willing to learn, and Brown is willing to teach. If Waiters can master playing in the flow of an offense, he could blossom into an 18-19 PPG scorer with a significantly elevated field goal percentage. If not, he's going to become nary more than a poor man's Stephon Marbury.

SF Earl Clark/Alonzo Gee: The mere fact that there's a slash in the name doesn't bode well for the position. Clark and Gee are interchangeable parts at this point. Both have some length that can help with perimeter defense – not that either of them are going to earn a spot on the NBA All-Defensive Team. Neither brings much in the way of offense.

The popular theory, of course, is that whoever mans this position is merely a placeholder until

the Cavs make a run at LeBron next summer. But regardless of whether LBJ returns or not, this position will need an upgrade after this season.

PF Tristan Thompson: Give TT credit – he’s worked his tail off the past two years. He came into the league as a raw athlete with little in the way of skill. Now, you could make a case that he’s the most fundamentally sound of the Cavs’ five starters.

He’ll never pour in 20 points a game. He doesn’t need to. TT needs to defend, rebound and make the few open shots he gets – in that order. If his new righty jump shot lets him do that, there are few, if any, real questions about him. And that’s a great place for a third-year player to be.

C Andrew Bynum: He’s the guy on this roster who really makes your stomach churn and your heart pitter-patter. You really, really don’t want to place a lot of hope in the idea that he’ll recover to be the interior force he was with the Lakers. But if he does, he could be the ingredient that turns this team into something truly special.

Bynum, with his knees and head on straight, is the best post-playing big man in the league. Yeah, you have Pau and Z-Bo and an aging Tim Duncan – I’ll still take a healthy, motivated Bynum on the block. He’s big, strong, nimble and adept at shooting with both hands. He’s virtually impossible to stop if he gets deep position on his defender. He has to be double-teamed in many cases, which opens up shots for the other four guys.

A healthy Bynum paired with a healthy Kyrie? You can see why the defense mechanisms go up if you dwell on it. It’s too heartbreaking to think about it not happening.

Bench

F/C Anderson Varejao: In lieu of Bynum, Andy is the starting center. And that’s far from ideal, both because the increased workload of the past few years likely contributed to his recent string of injuries, and because Andy is at his best in a super-sub role.

Andy needs to be allowed to roam the floor, harassing players on the wings, drawing charges and being an all-around nuisance to the other team. As the starting center, he needs to stay close to the basket and play a much more static role. That's just not his game, and it showed over the past few years. Despite Andy's prodigious rebounding totals, the Cavs interior defense was quite porous when Andy was out there.

G Jarrett Jack: He's going to be expected to be a human glue stick for this young team. He can bring scoring off the bench, but even more than that, his presence needs to be felt in the locker room by Irving and Waiters, both of whom need a role model who is still in uniform.

The primary worry with Jack is that he's 30, and that's right about when players start to trend downward in terms of production. Jack needs to bring a reliable 9-12 PPG off the bench, and if called upon to start, he has to still be able to shoulder a starter's workload.

G/F C.J. Miles: He's a gun for hire. He never met a three-pointer he wasn't willing to take. That probably makes him worth the minutes, because when he gets hot, he's a candidate for a 20-point quarter. But he brings little else other than those brief spasms of white-hot production. He's a horrid defender, and that might cost him a spot in Brown's rotation, despite his standing as a veteran player.

F Anthony Bennett: There are a lot of expectations riding on the first-ever Canadian taken with the No. 1 pick in the NBA Draft, and he's facing a steep learning curve. Offseason shoulder surgery robbed him of his conditioning, and the recent revelation that he suffers from sleep apnea and asthma has raised questions about his ability to recover his conditioning to the point that he can play 30 to 35 minutes a night.

As it is, nobody outside the Cavs organization is really looking for Bennett to win the Rookie of the Year Award, which seems to already be gravitating toward Orlando's Victor Oladipo. Unlike Oladipo, playing for a strip-mined Magic team that can afford to give him all the minutes he needs, Bennett will be fitted to a much more narrowly-defined role on a deeper Cavs team that has playoff aspirations. He won't get the minutes that other rookies might.

Despite the conditioning issues, Bennett is a talented scorer. He's already demonstrated his shooting touch throughout the preseason, and his fourth-quarter outburst to beat Oladipo's Magic early the preseason offered a tantalizing glimpse of what Bennett could become.

His first NBA season could be a tough one, though.

C Tyler Zeller: Sometimes, it just doesn't pay to get out of bed in the morning. Zeller did everything that was asked of him this summer. He bulked up, adding a significant amount of muscle to his slender frame. He worked on his game, preparing to fight for a rotation spot on a roster that contains two veteran centers ahead of him.

His reward? Injuring his hip in the club's first scrimmage, then having to undergo an appendectomy less than a week later. Zeller's entire preseason was washed out.

Given the injury histories of Bynum and Varejao, Zeller still figures to be an important part of this team. But due to his preseason misfortune, his role is kind of undefined at the moment.

G/F Sergey Karasev: The Cavs' other first-round pick from this past spring has a lot worth liking. He's less than a week removed from his 20th birthday, but has already played professionally in Russia. He's a heady player with a rangy jumper and underrated passing skills. He comes from strong basketball pedigree. His dad is Vasily Karasev, who was one of the best players in Russia in the 1990s, and later became a coach who has had a major hand in his son's development.

The junior Karasev has said he models his game on that of Spurs great Manu Ginobili. If he becomes a next-generation Ginobili for the Cavs, I think we'll take that without a lot of argument. As for now, he's extremely skinny and not used to the physical nature of the NBA game. Let's see what happens over the next few years, once he has a chance to fill out his frame and refine his game.

The Canton shuffle: Carrick Felix, Matthew Dellavedova and Henry Sims round out the Cavs roster. All three figure to log some major minutes playing for the NBDL's Canton Charge this

season, but depending on how hard the injury bug bites the Cavs, we could see some or all of them in action at The Q.

Felix is a second-round pick this past spring from Arizona State. The swingman is Brown's kind of guy – a nose-to-the-grindstone worker who values defense. If he shows any scoring potential, Brown will find a place for him with the big-league club.

Dellavedova is an Australian import who played for the Aussies in the 2012 Olympics. The point guard is an undrafted product of St. Mary's College in California. He doesn't possess much athleticism, but comes with the reputation of a high basketball IQ and providing great court leadership, with enough of a jump shot to get by. His lack of athleticism, however, figures to be a major hindrance at the defensive end, where he's already shown that he has trouble staying in front of other NBA point guards. He'll have to compensate somehow, if he wants to carve out an NBA career.

Sims was the last man standing in the battle for the 15th roster spot. The center is an undrafted product of Georgetown who looked solid during the preseason. The best thing you can probably say about Sims as a long-term NBA prospect is that he's willing to do the dirty work of defense, rebounding and dishing out fouls.

Coaching: Mike Brown returns to the Cavs sideline for the first time since LeBron quit and/or choked his way out of the 2010 playoffs, and subsequently out of Cleveland. In the interim, Brown had a forgettable year and five games as coach of the Lakers, where he struggled to manage Kobe Bryant and the Lakers' arsenal of mercurial talent.

Brown's Lakers tenure wasn't a success by any macro-level measurement, but he did have a positive impact on Bynum, pushing all the right buttons and enabling the often difficult-to-manage center to compile his best statistical season. Brown enthusiastically endorsed a Bynum signing to GM Chris Grant over the summer.

Bynum is the type of project Brown loves – a young player who tends to thrive when given a high degree of structure and discipline. The same can be said for the remainder of the Cavs roster.

Brown is, at his heart, a teacher. He's at his best when molding wet clay. And the Cavs will provide him tons of wet clay this season.

Defense does win championships. The best teams in the league are almost always the best defensive teams in the league. For the past few years, the Cavs have been in desperate need of the type of structure and defensive fundamentals that Brown will provide.

But Brown also comes with the deserved rap of enabling poor offensive execution. He tends to let bad habits develop at that end of the floor, failing to eradicate them at the root the way he would at the defensive end.

The object of the game is still to put the ball in the hoop, and if Browns' second Cavs tenure is to be longer and more successful than his first, he has to cultivate this team's offense the way he does its defense.

To that end, he has compiled an intriguing coaching staff that includes NBA coaching stalwart Bernie Bickerstaff – Brown's first mentor in the NBA – and Igor Kokoskov, a well-traveled assistant coach who will serve, in effect, as the team's offensive coordinator.

Training: The Cavs underwent another sea change this summer by rebuilding their entire training staff. Gone is longtime trainer Max Benton, replaced by the newly-named "Cavs Performance Team." The performance team will be led by Alex Moore, the former strength and conditioning coach for the U.S. Ski Team.

Results have yet to bear out the wisdom of the decision, but it's an attempt by the Cavs to address the fact that they have a number of key players with long injury histories by building a training department much closer to what you might see in Europe or Australia. The Aussies are often credited as world leaders in sports training, rehabilitation and injury prevention.

The creation of the performance team is the result of months of research by the Cavs brain

trust, comparing the common practices of American sports training with those in other countries. What Grant and his staff concluded from the research is that American sports training methods lag behind the rest of the developed world. Hence, the development of the new model.

If it keeps Irving, Bynum and Varejao on the floor and producing, it's a great move. We'll know a lot more by midseason.