

Trajan "The Alaskan Assassin" Langdon. Chris Mihm. DeSagana Diop. Dajuan Wagner. Luke Jackson. These were all first round draft picks of the Cavaliers over a seven year stretch. And in Erik Cassano's latest ... he says that it's these selections, and not the signings of Larry Hughes, Damon Jones, and Donyell Marshall two years ago that have caused the Cavs current roster predicament.



For the better part of their 37 years, the Cavaliers have always seemed like kind of a backwards NBA franchise.

They've retired six numbers despite zero NBA Finals appearances. Of those six, only one -- Nate Thurmond -- is a Hall of Famer. A Hall of Famer who got to the Hall of Fame based on a stellar career spent mostly with the Warriors, and ended with the Cavs

Their most visible alumnus, Austin Carr, was more on par with Craig Ehlo than LeBron James as a player.

Their most famous owner was Ted Stepien, a man so infamously awful at the nuts and bolts of running a sports franchise, the NBA had to make a rule that now prevents teams from trading away first-round draft picks in consecutive years.

The fans' most beloved franchise figure never suited up for the team, nor did he ever patrol the sideline. He's the radio announcer, Joe Tait.

Every which way you turn, it seems the Cavs have been travelling south to go north. That includes recent draft picks.

A review of the Cavs' draft history since 2000 reveals a peculiar trend:

The Cavs' first-round draft picks have been, sans LeBron James, uniformly bad since the start of the decade. Over the same period, the Cavs' second-round picks, or acquired rookies who were drafted in the second round, have almost always had success.

Consider the following:

Since 2000, other than LeBron, the Cavs have drafted (or acquired on draft night) Chris Mihm,

DeSagana

Diop

,

DaJuan

Wagner, Luke Jackson and Shannon Brown.

All five sustained some kind of injury that hindered their rookie seasons and the injuries for the first four carried over into their sophomore seasons. Mihm and Diop eventually fought back to become solid contributors for other teams, but never amounted to much in their short Cleveland stints.

Wagner's career was sidetracked by a digestive tract ailment that eventually required surgery to remove part of his intestines. He attempted to make a comeback with the Warriors this season, but was cut before the season started. His NBA future appears murky at best.

Jackson arrived in Cleveland healthy, but promptly injured his back in summer league ball a month after being drafted and hasn't been the same since. He was traded to Boston for Dwayne Jones prior to this season starting, and was subsequently cut by the Celtics. Like Wagner, his NBA future is in doubt.

Brown was declared the steal of the 2006 draft by some basketball pundits, but has been nothing more than a turnover machine in limited action this season. A deep bone bruise in his leg sidelined him for all of January and part of February, slowing his transition to the NBA.

All in all, a draft history that's not exactly seal-of-approval worthy.

But move down a round, and you'll notice a difference. The clouds start to part.

Since 2000, the Cavs' second-round draft picks have included Carlos Boozer, Jason Kapono and Dan Gibson. Anderson

Varejao

was a second-round pick of the Magic acquired by the

Cavs

the

summer

before his rookie season.

Boozer, backstabbing bastard that he is, was named to the Western Conference all-star team this year. Kapono continues to make us all wish the Cavs would have protected him in the Charlotte Bobcats expansion draft. He won the three-point shootout as a member of the Heat this month, and continues to be a solid contributor for the defending world champs.

Gibson has risen from the 42nd pick to the Cavs' starting lineup, where his perimeter shooting

provides a desperately-needed dimension to the Cavs' offense. Varejao has morphed into one of the best bench players in the league.

What is the reason for the upside-down success the Cavs have had in the draft? I couldn't even begin to hypothesize. But it does prove three things:

One, the NBA draft isn't any easier to project than the NFL draft just because there are only two rounds.

Two, second-round picks are not throwaway picks.

Three, if an NBA team wants to have long-term success, it must draft well.

It's nice to look at the diamonds the Cavs have been able to dig out of the second round. But the growing history of first-round busts is a troubling trend.

Why did GM Danny Ferry need to commit gobs of cash to veterans in the summer of 2005? It's not that he was playing fast and loose with owner Dan Gilbert's money. It's that he inherited a team with huge holes in the roster and a dearth of talent around LeBron. A dearth caused by draft misfires.

In 2005, Ferry had \$28 million in cap space and no draft picks in two of the ensuing three years. So he was forced to plug the holes with veteran free agents, and the only way a team with no title-studded street cred can land veteran free agents is to overpay for them. Hence, huge contracts that make us all sweat and wonder if the salary cap will allow the Cavs any room for improvement in the coming years.

Ferry and coach Mike Brown make a big deal about building the Cavs in the mold of their former employer, the San Antonio Spurs. They want a team that walks like the Spurs, talks like the Spurs, plays like the Spurs and wins like the Spurs.

But in order to do that, you must draft like the Spurs.

Lost in all of the hype that surrounded the "will he/won't he" of last week's unsuccessful bid to land Mike Bibby is the fact that the Spurs don't have these problems. They drafted Tony Parker six years ago. Lost in all of the hand-wringing over Larry Hughes' perceived inability to be LeBron's wing man is the fact that the Spurs don't have to worry about things like that. They used the draft to unearth Argentinian

Manu

Ginobili, who

has become a championship compliment to Tim Duncan.

Free agency is good for patching one or two holes, but veterans who are more than halfway through their careers make a lousy foundation for long-term success. Should I point to the Browns' offensive line, or are you already drawing that parallel?

If the Cavs want some short-term sustenance to get LeBron to the playoffs a few times, his current cast can help him do that. If Ferry and Brown truly want this team to become one of the league's best, every year, for a decade or more, they need to start hitting on first-round picks.

The Spurs will tell you there is no other way to do it.