

In May 2003, the Cavs were a franchise in shambles. They hadn't made the playoffs since 1998, which was the last time they finished over .500. Their recent draft history was absolutely abysmal. Then the ping-pong balls poked holes in the clouds, and for the first time in ages, everything bounced Cleveland's way. And it's only beginning. Cleveland, for the first time ever, is becoming a basketball town.



Let's hop in the time machine for a minute, because I think this is one of those moments that calls for a little perspective.

We'll set the dial for May 2003. The place: Wherever you were NBA Deputy Commissioner Russ Granik slid his finger under the seal of the NBA draft lottery envelope with a giant "2" on it. Wherever you were when he flipped over the card and showed the world the logo of the Memphis Grizzlies, leaving the Cavaliers as the only team left standing for the number one pick.

Wherever you were when it all turned around.

In May 2003, the Cavs were a franchise in shambles. They hadn't made the playoffs since 1998, which was the last time they finished over .500. Their recent draft history was a black parade that screamo-rockers My Chemical Romance couldn't even imagine.

Dajuan Wagner, sixth overall in 2002. DeSagana Diop, eighth overall in 2001.
Chris Mihm, acquired for
Jamal Crawford on draft night 2000. Trajan
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overall in 1999.

Shawn Kemp, the Cavs' last attempt at a franchise savior, was in the final stages of killing his career with vices, long since forgotten in Cleveland. The future

centered on rookie Carlos Boozer, Ricky Davis and Darius Miles, but that weak core couldn't prevent the Cavs from careening to a 17-65 record, tying the Denver Nuggets for the league's worst.

Then the ping-pong balls poked holes in the clouds, and for the first time in ages, everything bounced Cleveland's way.

This LeBron James kid was so good, he couldn't be for real, some thought. A high-school senior, he was already rumored to be the best player on the floor when scrimmaging with top-flight NBA players.

He so fascinated then-coach John Lucas, he brought him in to scrimmage against Cavs players, eventually getting slapped with a \$100,000 tampering fine for the effort. Not only was he really good, he was a local kid from Akron. If Northeast Ohioans like anything, it's a sports star who is one of us by birth.

It was simply perfect when the Cavs secured the right to draft him on that spring day four years ago. It was a bounce of fortune so good, so needed, that Austin Carr broke down and cried when the Cavs secured the first pick.

That's why Thursday night meant so much to the entire state of Ohio.

A little more than four years after the fortuitous bounce of ping-pong balls, LeBron showed us why, in spite of our cynical, burned-one-too-many-times Cleveland selves, we are compelled to hope. We are compelled to feel that this isn't just another era of unfulfilled promise and unrequited love we're entering. Thursday night, we saw greatness, of Ohio, by Ohio and for Ohio.

It's not just that LeBron scored 48 points in 50 minutes of play in one of the two or three most important playoff games in Cavs history. It's how he scored them. It's how, as the game wore on, he became more and more unstoppable, more and more superhuman.

It's how, by the second overtime, when both teams were running out of gas, LeBron started making 20-foot fadeaway jumpers like they were layups. It's how the Pistons, one of the

NBA's

most dynamic defensive teams, simply did not have an answer for him in crunch time.

It's how, no matter how many times the Cavs fell behind against the Pistons' best start-to-finish effort of the series thus far,

LeBron

-- with a little help from his friends -- always came roaring back.

With the clock winding down in the fourth quarter, the Cavs fell behind by seven and it looked like the Pistons were going to head back to Cleveland with a chance to close out the series. But

LeBron

rescued the

Cavs

with a pair of thunderous dunks that helped send the game to overtime.

In the first overtime, LeBron put the Cavs up by four with a 22-foot fadeaway in tight space with the shot clock winding down, a shot that can only be described as head-smacking. Which is exactly what I did as part of the throng of 11,000 filling the lower bowl of The Q to watch the game on Q-Vision.

(You want to know how hungry Cleveland is for a title? If the Cavs do indeed finish off the Pistons and advance to the NBA Finals, it appears the

Cavs

might put 20,000 in The Q to watch Games 1 and 2 on TV.)

In the second overtime, with the Cavs trailing 107-104, LeBron drilled a game-tying three, then scored what proved to be the winning basket.

All in all, he scored 25 straight points, the definition of loading your entire team onto your back and winning. In Game 5 of the conference finals. On the road. Against the Pistons.

The Pistons won't concede the series at the outset of Game 6. They're too good and too experienced to do that. Hopefully the Cavs realize that, and won't lay the kind of egg they laid the last time they had a chance to close out a series at home, against the Nets two weeks ago. It's still going to take some work to get the
Cavs

to their first-ever NBA Finals.

But you have to think that the Pistons are just about exhausted. For three straight games, LeBron has simply taken over in the fourth quarter and overtime. Detroit has thrown everything they can at LeBron, and still he wins games for his team.

These are the days we dreamed of when the ping-pong balls bounced the Cavs' way four years ago. This isn't even a renaissance of Cleveland basketball. These are uncharted waters, and our captain is the type of player who always crushed us in the past, now playing for our team.

It has been a majestic rise for our once-downtrodden, once-forgotten basketball club. And it's only beginning. Cleveland, for the first time ever, is becoming a basketball town.