

Erik Cassano is a glass half full columnist ... in a city that hasn't always justified it. And not even he saw the Cavaliers reaching the NBA Finals this season. But here we are, and here our team is, about to take on the three-time world champion San Antonio Spurs in what is arguably the most compelling Finals since Michael Jordan's Bulls juggernaut faced the often-denied Utah Jazz of John Stockton and Karl Malone in 1997 and '98. Papa Cass previews the series for us.



Welcome to the column I didn't think I'd be writing this year.

As far as Cleveland fans go, I tend to err on the side of optimism more than pessimism, a tough thing to do in and of itself. But even I didn't have the boldness to predict that I'd be sitting at my computer about to give you, the valued reader of TheClevelandFan.com, a Cleveland Cavaliers primer for the NBA Finals. Not this year, at least.

But here we are, and here our team is, about to take on the three-time world champion San Antonio Spurs in what is arguably the most compelling Finals since Michael Jordan's Bulls juggernaut faced the often-denied Utah Jazz of John Stockton and Karl Malone in 1997 and '98.

Goliath is played by Tim Duncan, the centerpiece of the closest thing the NBA has to a bionic team. Bigger. Faster. More powerful. Scientifically engineered to win in May and June.

David is played by LeBron James, the most convincing example of the Man Who Makes Everyone Around Him Better, taking his merry band of misfits to the big dance.

Somehow, we all seem to believe that LeBron is destined to become Goliath someday. But not at this exact moment. He's still the underdog, and it's up to him to prove he belongs on basketball's biggest stage. He's either going to do it quicker than anyone would have imagined, or the Spurs are going to prove that

the last step to greatness is, as Bugs Bunny would say, a lu-lu.

## **Five reasons to be confident:**

1. He's known by many names. We'll just call him "The Reason I'm Even Writing This"

Somewhere betwixt Napoleon, George S. Patton and King Arthur, there is LeBron James. The ultimate leader, the rare talent who can win seemingly by sheer force of will. Game 5 against the Pistons stands as a testament to his ability to singlehandedly win games against marquee competition.

Sure, we can break down what the Spurs have in store for LeBron. Sure, Bruce Bowen, quite possibly the best man defender in the league, will attempt to harass and hound LeBron mercilessly. His job is to make sure that LeBron has to work so hard just to get the ball that by the time he is actually touching leather, the shot clock is at four seconds, he's 20 feet from the basket and breathing heavily.

Sure, Tim Duncan stands in the way of LeBron's final few steps to the basket, a far better low-post defender than anything the Cavs have faced to this point.

But LeBron is a walking, talking, boldface, 48-point font X-factor. And any nuggets of conventional wisdom about facing the Spurs just might get tossed out the window by His Kingness.

With LeBron, logic is superseded by his vast ability. And he loves being the underdog in situations like this.

2. Mike Brown doesn't have to call "Pop" his daddy

It's not just the fact that the Cavs are 3-1 against the Spurs since Mike Brown took over as head coach. It's the fact that some of the Cavs' most complete, well-rounded games have come against San Antonio. In two games against the Spurs this year, the Cavs essentially controlled the fourth quarter, winning by scores of 88-81 and 82-78.

They beat the Spurs at their own defensive-minded game, and that credit goes to Mike Brown, a Spurs assistant under Gregg Popovich for three years, including the Spurs' 2003 title.

This is one case where I don't think the results of the regular season are irrelevant. The Cavs played some of their best basketball against the Spurs for a reason: They were prepared to face them.

If there is any coach in this league who can prepare a team to play the Spurs, it's Mike Brown. If the Cavs look lost out there come Thursday, it won't be because Brown didn't spend enough time grinding the Spurs' game plan into their heads. The two teams basically run the same sets, for gosh sakes. It's going to be like fighting your shadow from a strategic standpoint.

### 3. Do the Spurs have Pistonitis?

If it's one thing I can't stand, it's a three-time world championship team with nothing left to prove to anyone whining about how they're being disrespected.

Punch the tickets of Duncan and Tony Parker on the "Everyone Just Wants To Talk About LeBron" bandwagon. Since the Cavs clinched the East title on Saturday, both Spurs stars have voiced their feelings of neglect to the media.

Can I shed a little tear for our dear brothers in Texas? Especially as ESPN's Jamal Mashburn says he "can't wait to see the Spurs dominate" and Marc Stein picks the Spurs to roll in five?

Sorry, I just figured a team that has won as much as the Spurs would let their play do the talking, not resort to the same whiny trash-talk that the Pistons shoveled on our feet as their shot to win the East finals went slip-sliding away. And the Spurs haven't even started playing Cleveland yet.

I'm starting to really like the Cavs' "no excuses, shut up and play" policy. I think good karma comes from that. I hope they keep it up, win or lose.

### 4. This ain't the Suns you're facing

This much we know: The Cavs have most definitely been challenged in the playoffs. They took on the consensus best team in their conference, and turned them into the consensus second-best team in the conference. They did it with a team-wide philosophy centered on defense and a heavy dose of LeBron (with just a touch of Boobie).

The Spurs, meanwhile, were spared the task of facing arch-rival Dallas, the only team that could have (and probably would have) knocked them out. The result is a playoff run that makes the Spurs look like a team on a mission, but in reality was just a way-too-good-for-the-competition club snacking on the Nuggets, pushing around the finesse Suns and beating up on a Jazz club that isn't yet conference finals-caliber, but, like San Antonio, didn't have to face Dallas.

Now, the Cavs have an opportunity to shove some serious defense in the faces of the Spurs. Cleveland is by far the most physical defensive club the Spurs will have faced in these playoffs. Don't underestimate the toll that might take on San Antonio if Cleveland can lengthen this series to six or seven games.

### 5. If you can play with the Pistons, you can play with the Spurs

The Spurs are a more dynamic team than the Pistons, but they still try to beat you in much the same way. Their lifeline is their point guard. The Cavs hindered Chauncey Billups greatly in winning the East title. Now the challenge is to do the same to Tony Parker, who is not as big as Billups, but is much faster and better at scoring in the lane.

The defensive philosophy that worked so well against Detroit still applies against San Antonio. Trap the Spurs' guards. Don't let them go off for huge nights in scoring or assists. Force the frontcourt – which isn't as deep at Detroit's – to beat you.

## Five reasons to be wary:

### 1. You know the drill

The Spurs have been here before. They know what to expect. They know what to expect from YOU. They won't get rattled. They'll execute flawlessly. You'll have to play darn-near perfect basketball to even have a chance to beat them.

Even if it all doesn't end up being true, you have to assume it's true.

### 2. The French Connection

The Cavs had better stop Tony Parker, or this will indeed be a short series. If Brown's defensive schemes and the defensive play at the point don't slow Parker

down, San Antonio's offensive possessions will be a blur of layups and three-pointers off kickout passes, and the Cavs will routinely attempt to dig out of 25-point holes.

This is where Larry Hughes' bum foot worries me. If he can't keep up with Parker, he can't play. It's that simple.

### 3. Big-shot Bob

How can we go through five reasons to be wary without mentioning the human dagger, Robert Horry?

If the Cavs are leading late, it would behoove them to push that lead out to multiple possessions. If the difference is three points or less, you know who gets the final shot for the Spurs, and you know I'll be leaning over my balcony railing so I can barf when the ball slices through the net.

Do not let Robert Horry's clutch shooting decide this series. That is an order.

### 4. Manu: "Hey, Andy! You flop? So do I! Let's flop together!"

Manu Ginobili, much like Anderson Varejao, is schooled in the soccernista method of basketball defense: Get hit, and crumple to the ground screaming like Lorena Bobbitt is slicing off your manhood with a serrated butter knife.

Normally, the refs won't buy it. But trailing by one with 15 seconds to play and LeBron fixing to plow into the lane right in front of Ginobili, that would probably be the one time that LeBron's arm hair would graze Ginobili's jersey, Ginobili would fling himself into the second row and LeBron would get whistled for a charge. Two Ginobili free throws, a desperation half-court heave at the buzzer, game over.

My stomach acid is welling just thinking about it.

### 5. The West's Ben Wallace

A big reason the Cavs were able to dominate the fourth quarters so consistently against the Pistons was because Ben Wallace now calls Chicago home. If the Pistons still had Ben Wallace, the Cavs might still have won the series, but no way does Cleveland outrebound Detroit by 20 in the deciding game, and no way do

the Cavs win by 16.

There will be no such luxury against San Antonio, where Tim Duncan can rebound and block shots with the best of them. It might not affect LeBron as much, but I'm going to be holding my breath every time Sasha Pavlovic and Daniel Gibson slash to the hoop.

I'll admit: I'm kind of concerned that the only Cav who is going to be able to do any damage inside is LeBron. Drew Gooden needs to have an awesome series against Duncan, with some help from Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Andy V.

## **The X-factors: LeBron's game and Mike Brown's game plan**

On paper, these two teams aren't even close. The Spurs are a deep, talented, experienced team that fits together like a puzzle. The Cavs are a curious mixture of mediocre bench players, youthful starters and aging veterans.

But LeBron does indeed allow you to throw out the conventional wisdom book. His abilities are sublime, and there is always that chance that, no matter what the opposition throws at him, they won't be able to stop him.

Combine that with Brown's familiarity with both the Spurs play sets and the Spurs players, and you have two very valuable weapons in your cache. Will it be enough to pull off the shocking upset? We'll know within the next two weeks.

## **Postseason Fear Factor: 9**

### **Prediction: Cavs in six**

Here is believing that the recent history between these two teams isn't just a fluke. Bill Livingston's prediction prior to last season will come true.