

In Erik Cassano's latest, he says that the Cavs' unceremonious exit from the NBA Finals just doesn't fit with The Drive, The Fumble, The Shot, Red Right 88 or Game 7 of the 1997 World Series. This time, Cleveland was outclassed by an infinitely more experienced, more talented and better opponent. No matter how hard you might want to weep over what might have been, it just wasn't going to happen this year. Having had some time to reflect, Erik tells us the six things we all should have learned from this series.



As my friend Justin and I were driving down Interstate 90 to the Indians game Friday night, one of the animated LCD-display billboards high above the road cycled through its carousel of messages until it arrived on a spot from FM rock station WMMS. “Added to the list: The Sweep.” It was probably WMMS’s way of trying to feel our pain over the Spurs’ manhandling of the Cavaliers. But for those of us who were trying to salvage some shred of dignity over the four-game sweep, it came across as bitter whining, a knee-jerk reaction that only helps to perpetuate the belief that Cleveland is under a voodoo spell that prevents our teams from winning championships.

And here it was, on a billboard next to a heavily-traveled interstate, so that locals and visitors alike could see exactly how capable we Clevelanders are of feeling sorry for ourselves.

After Justin and I thought about the ramifications of such a sign, we decided we weren't going to be listening to WMMS Friday night, on the off chance there were accompanying crybaby commercial spots airing.

Perhaps there is an underlying tragedy of sorts linked to Cleveland's participation in and subsequent ouster from the 2007 NBA Finals. The fact that there are

media-types out there who want to file this under “Only In Cleveland” simply underscores just how inexperienced we are participating in sports championship series.

It just doesn't happen that often around here, so when it does, we fall madly in love with that team. Which means that when they fail, we take it especially hard, to the point that we seriously believe that no other city has ever experienced failure and humiliation like this.

But contrary to what that billboard on I-90 said, the Cavs' unceremonious exit from the NBA Finals just doesn't fit with The Drive, The Fumble, The Shot, Red Right 88 or Game 7 of the 1997 World Series.

This time, it wasn't a freak miscue on the 1-yard line, a great player snatching a Denver or Chicago victory from the jaws of defeat or a Cleveland closer bouncing 58-foot curveballs in the dirt. This time, it never got a chance to get that far.

This time, Cleveland was outclassed by an infinitely more experienced, more talented and better opponent. No matter how hard you might want to weep over what might have been, it just wasn't going to happen this year.

As I watched the NBA Finals progress, some truths became evident to me:

**1.**  
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**The Cavs made it to the Finals for two reasons, and only two: LeBron James and Mike Brown's defense.**

Everything else was just details. Sure, Drew Gooden, Sasha Pavlovic and Daniel Gibson showed up with big games and big plays here and there, but nothing consistent. Cleveland's defense put the team in a position where LeBron could take games over in the fourth quarter. It's how they beat New Jersey and Detroit (and honestly Washington as well), controlling them but never dominating them.

**2.**  
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**The Cavs made the Finals in spite of their offense.**

Defense might win championships, but I doubt many people who adhere to that philosophy believe that a team should lug their offense around like a ball and chain.

That's what the Cavs have done all season. The fact that the Cavs were able to reach the NBA Finals with an offense that was borderline-inept for long stretches underscores the superlative talents of LeBron and the fact that the Eastern Conference is devoid of top-flight offensive talent beyond His Kingness and Dwyane Wade.

The Cavs have internalized Mike Brown's defensive mantra, which is great. But I'm really hoping that Brown gets a clue about running an offense before too many missed championship chances have passed. The Cavs simply cannot win a title with the offense as it stands. Which plays into the fact that...

**3.**

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**The Cavs desperately need a ball-distributing point guard.**

Brown might or might not need an assistant coach to install a new offensive game plan. We can debate that until opening night in November. What we do know is that any game plan is not going to amount to a hill of beans if the team can't implement it.

Repeat it with me: LeBron is not a point forward. LeBron is not a point forward. LeBron is not a point forward. Allowing him to stand at the top of the arc dribbling the ball while lesser offensive players make half-assed cuts along the baseline, set half-assed picks or blatantly stand around is very bad for the offense.

LeBron needs to have the freedom to make cuts to the basket without the ball. When LeBron takes his 6'-8" 250-pound frame and explodes to the hoop, he is the most unstoppable player in the game. If he gets the ball heading toward the hoop, he is going to be a continuation-foul machine.

The only way LeBron gets that level of freedom to dominate inside is if the Cavs acquire a point guard with the ball-distributing skills to find him as he is making said cuts to the basket. As far as I am concerned, that should be Danny Ferry's top priority this summer.

**4.**

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**LeBron should take all four Finals games, burn them onto DVDs, and watch them all summer.**

If LeBron truly wants to become a champion, he'll develop a Tiger Woods/Michael Jordan-like obsession with everything he is doing wrong, then try to correct it. All four NBA Finals games are chock full of Cleveland blunders that championship-caliber teams and players simply don't make – with the added benefit of the Spurs giving an excellent reference point for the type of well-executed basketball a team needs to play to win a title. Whether it's dumping the ball in to a shoot-first-think-later player like Anderson Varejao with the game on the line, fumbling the ball out of bounds, rushing shots in traffic, or any one of a number of other mental errors, the Finals provide a virtual catalog of the weaknesses the Cavs and LeBron must improve upon to win a championship.

5.

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**Even with more experience, the Cavs were not going to win a title against these Spurs.**

Let's not sell the Spurs short in our rush to gripe about another championship series whiff by a Cleveland team.

Fans of the NBA (not just the Cavs) realize that the Spurs are an historic team, right up there with the Lakers and Celtics of the '80 and the Bulls of the '90s. The fact that they have never won consecutive titles is antimatter. Four titles in nine years is an amazing feat.

After watching the Spurs for four games, their pinpoint execution, their unmatched poise with the game on the line, their entire roster's ability to hit big shots, the fact that if you cover Tony Parker, Tim Duncan and Manu Ginobili, then Bruce Bowen or Michael Finley will hurt you, I am convinced that no one in the East would have stood a chance against them this year.

The Pistons might have taken them to six games. So might have a healthy Heat team. But they weren't going to beat them. I'd go so far as to say the only team

that could have beaten San Antonio in a seven-game series this year is Dallas, and even they might not have been able to.

This was the Spurs at their best. Better than the 2003 and '05 editions that also won titles. This year, the Spurs' talent, experience, execution and determination came together in a perfect storm of playoff basketball. They weren't going to be denied. The Cavs simply happened to be the team in the way.

**6.**

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**Having said that, this experience will help the Cavs and LeBron in the long run.**

Jordan never lost an NBA Finals. LeBron is already 0-1. Does that mean LeBron is doomed to perpetual "Not in the same class as Jordan" status? Not necessarily.

For years, Jordan toiled in a powerful Eastern Conference, taking his best shots against the Pistons and Celtics and repeatedly coming up short. By the time Jordan finally broke through and reached the Finals in 1991, his hatred of losing was cemented. He was fire-tested and ready to do whatever it took to win championships.

LeBron isn't going to develop those Jordanesque qualities in the East playoffs. The East of the 2000s is far too weak to teach those lessons it taught Jordan 20 years ago. In order for LeBron to get the same education, he needs to make the Finals and get batted around by the real powers of the league in the Western Conference.

Hopefully suffering the slings and arrows of the past week and a half, along with a summer full of "No way on Earth the Cavs make it back to the Finals next year" rhetoric from the talking heads on ESPN will sufficiently chafe LeBron to the point that he'll want to prove this spring was no fluke.

How do great players become champions, particularly great players on not-so-great teams? They get determined to take their piece of the pie. Like Jordan did as the '80s became the '90s, LeBron must become determined to lift his team up. Ferry can add some quality pieces around LeBron, but ultimately, the Cavs' ability to win championships will rest with LeBron's level of determination.

That's why, as much as it pained all of us to go through, getting drilled by a team like the Spurs on basketball's biggest stage is a valuable experience for LeBron and his team. It gives them a clear picture of what winning a championship will require.