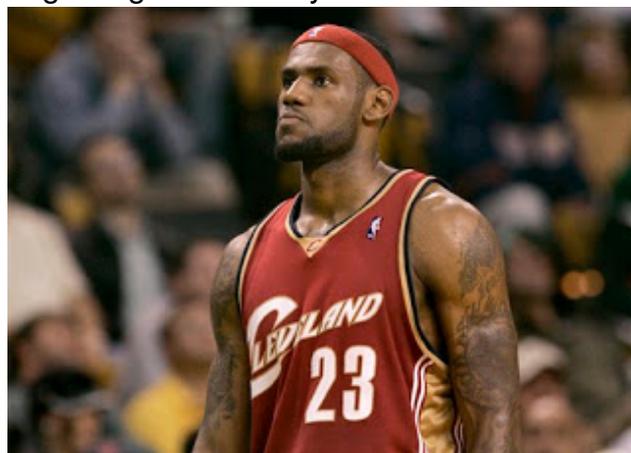


With the season set to tip off against the Dallas Mavericks next Wednesday, the Cavs look like they're in no shape to start playing games that count. Friday's 114-89 trouncing at the hands of the Celtics wrapped up a 1-6 preseason for the defending Eastern Conference champions. They were outscored by an average of 17 points in their six losses, and the final two games against Toronto and Boston featured abysmal fourth quarters by what appears to be the quintet that will be on the floor attempting to close out games beginning Wednesday. Erik Cassano is worried, and pens about it in his latest column for us.



Let me throw a few stats at you:

Absent Cavaliers Anderson Varejao and Sasha Pavlovic combined to average 15.8 points per game during the 2006-07 season. They averaged a combined 9.1 rebounds per game and turned the ball over a little more than twice per game in a total of 34 starts.

In other words, Varejao and Pavlovic statistically combined to equal the par-for-the-course output of Larry Hughes, with a smattering of Donyell Marshall to pad the rebounding category.

It's a loss to have Varejao and Pavlovic in contract limbo, no doubt, but you'd think it wouldn't be crippling. Pavlovic was the inconsistent fifth wheel in the starting lineup while Varejao, for all his energy and charge-drawing, never gave any indication that he was blossoming into a 15-point, 10-rebound, money-in-the-bank starter anytime soon.

But cripple the Cavs it appears to have done. With the season set to tip off against the Dallas Mavericks next Wednesday, the Cavs look like they're in no shape to start playing games that count.

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At first glance, it appears that the losses of Varejao and Pavlovic have affected the Cavs psychologically more than anything. LeBron has admitted in at least one interview that he feels like the team is heading into the season undermanned and at a disadvantage. It might be affecting his leadership, which would unquestionably affect how his teammates approach the season.

The Cavs appear to have regressed to the state they were in when Mike Brown first took over as head coach two years ago. Not only is the offense prone to long spells of standing around and watching the guy with the ball, the ball handling is sloppy, the defense is sluggish and prone to missing rotations, and the technically-sound rebounding approach that allowed the Cavs to dominate inside for three playoff rounds last spring is gone.

Inside, on the perimeter, in transition, the Cavs have been getting smoked every which way this preseason. There is no reason to believe they are suddenly going to flip the switch and regain their conference-champion form when the fearsome Mavs take the court in less than a week.

Now is a dangerous time to pout over who isn't present and accounted for. With that collective attitude, the Cavs face the very real possibility of putting themselves in a deep hole in a short amount of time.

If LeBron and his merry band want to stop staring at the empty lockers of Varejao and Pavlovic, might I suggest the 2007-08 schedule as reading material? Knowledge is power, after all, and the knowledge to be attained at the moment is that the Cavs' November schedule is painful.

After opening night against the Mavs, the Cavs host a Knicks team that always gives them fits. Then, it's off on a six-game, eight-day Western jaunt that opens in Phoenix and includes four other Western Conference playoff teams from last spring.

When they return home, the Cavs face an improved Orlando team that beat them twice in China during the preseason, Jerry Sloan's always-tough Jazz (whom they also face on the Western swing), and a back-to-back with Milwaukee and Minnesota. The month closes out with Toronto, Indiana, Boston, Detroit and

Toronto again.

To put it a different way, 12 of the Cavs 17 November games are against teams that made the playoffs last season, and Boston is vastly improved, so you can essentially say that 13 of 17 games are against playoff-caliber competition.

Did I mention December begins with a trip to Boston, followed by a back-to-back against New Jersey and Washington?

If the Cavs head into the regular season with their heads hung low and grumbling about the absences of Varejao and Pavlovic, their early-season competition will steamroll them and they'll be 10 games under .500 before most of us are stringing Christmas lights.

For a defending conference champ to sink that low is not only humiliating, it would be difficult to recover from. In possession of newly-minted hardware and with a new banner soon to be hung from the rafters of The Q, it will be almost impossible for the Cavs to sneak up on anyone this year. Cleveland is now viewed around the league as marquee competition. The Cavs have both newfound and long-simmering rivalries with teams like Washington, Boston and Detroit, LeBron has personal rivalries with Dwyane Wade, Carmelo Anthony and virtually any other superstar with whom he crosses paths.

If the Cavs are expecting any team or superstar player to attack them with anything less than their A-game, they are sorely mistaken. Knocking off LeBron and Co. is a prize everyone now wants.

Looking up and down the roster, the Cavs are still a pretty good team even without Varejao and Pavlovic. They still have the point-guard issues of a year ago, and without Varejao, the backup center position is up in the air. But LeBron's chief lieutenants are all still in place. Drew Gooden and Zydrunas Ilgauskas are still there to bury baseline jumpers, Daniel Gibson is there to stretch defenses with his outside shooting, and it appears Shannon Brown is ready to grow into a more integral role off the bench.

But whether the Cavs -- most importantly LeBron -- realize that is another story. And that attitude might cost them dearly in the early going.