

LeBron James is getting roasted by fans and prominent area media personalities for wearing a Yankees hat to a playoff game at Jacobs Field. The national media is completely dismissing the Cavs as a fluke last year, and absolutely no one has picked them to successfully defend their Eastern Conference title. And Danny Ferry is catching heat for his '05 free agent class and inactivity the last two off-seasons. Has there ever been a more disrespected defending conference champion in NBA history? Papa Cass weighs in.



A recent caller to a WTAM sports talk show let his feelings toward this town's sports teams be known, loud and clear:

"Go Browns, go Indians and screw LeBron."

Mike Trivisonno has called LeBron James an idiot on the air. Esquire writer Scott Raab

, a native

Clevelander

, has gone so far as to call him

["worthless scum."](#)

How far the mighty have fallen. A year ago, the entire region of Northeast Ohio might have donated their paychecks if it meant keeping LeBron in Cleveland.

Now, after the unforgivable sin of wearing a Yankees cap to an Indians-Yankees playoff game,

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can apparently just pack his bags for New York right now. There are some in Cleveland that want no part of him anymore.

The fact that LeBron is the best thing that has ever happened to Cleveland basketball has taken a backseat to the fact that he roots for the wrong baseball team. If ever there was a red-flag indicator of where the Cavs stand in the pecking order of Cleveland sports, that was it. Lift the Cavs to the Finals, great. But side against the Browns or Indians, you're no friend of ours.

If that was worst criticism facing the Cavs, it would be bad enough. But the Cavs as an organization are getting similar negative treatment just about everywhere they turn.

The national media views their conference title as the mother of all flukes, a product of a weak conference, favorable playoff seeding and a Pistons team that was caught napping. On top of that, they've raked the Cavs over the coals for not making any moves of note this offseason, and failing to come to terms with Anderson Varejao and, until recently, Sasha Pavlovic.

It wouldn't be such a bitter pill to swallow if the national media wasn't stumbling over themselves to proclaim the revamped Celtics of Kevin Garnett and Ray Allen the new top dog in the East before they even played a dribble of basketball together. But the situation is made even worse by the fact that many Cavs fans are also dragging the name of their own team through the mud.

The Cavs are possibly the most negatively-perceived defending conference champion in NBA history. No one thinks they deserved to go as far as they did last year. No one outside of Cleveland wants to see them go that far again this year, and no one in Cleveland seems to think they have much of a shot.

For the national yakkers and scribes, maybe it has something to do with not

wanting to spend June (or any other month of the year, for that matter) in Cleveland again. Cleveland is a rust-belt wasteland to East Cost elitists. I've accepted that. But when local fans and media members, or people who profess to being long-suffering Cleveland fans, start doing things like openly rooting for LeBron to take his Yankees cap and get out of here, I find it troubling.

Despite the fact that LeBron has helped set a franchise record with four playoff series wins in the span of two years, despite the fact that Danny Ferry has cut-and-pasted together a conference championship club out of a team that has had no draft picks in 2005 and '07, and a long history of draft failure before that, despite the fact that Mike Brown took an average team and made them borderline-great with a defense-first philosophy that was utterly foreign when he took over, all we hear are harrumphs over what the team's trio of leaders hasn't been able to do.

There is always friction when the financial realities of professional sports teams meet the championship expectations of their fans. All Cavs fans see is that Boston added two star players, Detroit and Chicago fortified their rosters through the draft and the Bulls have been connected to Kobe Bryant through trade rumors. The Cavs, meanwhile, have been as silent as a mausoleum all summer and still don't have their best bench player in the fold.

Ferry has been verbally shredded by local fans in much the same way Indians GM Mark Shapiro was as the Indians slogged through their rebuilding phase. The common feeling seems to be that Ferry is asleep at the switch, or is obviously standing by, watching the rest of the East teams improve themselves in much the same way Nero supposedly played a fiddle as Rome burned.

The argument that Ferry backed himself into his own corner with his underproductive free agent class of '05 holds some validity. You can grill Ferry for spending owner Dan Gilbert's money in such a stupid fashion if you want, but what it really underscores is that free agency is a bad way to build a team. The way the NBA's collective bargaining agreement is set up, teams almost always have to overpay to get a veteran free agent to switch teams. The lone few exceptions

occur when a proven winning team can get an aging veteran to sign on for well below his market value in exchange for a shot at a title.

In the summer of '05, the Cavs had no draft picks thanks to Jim Paxson signing away the rights to the team's first-round pick as a condition of disastrous

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deal -- which actually cost the

Cavs

two first-rounders in the end. They were coming off a March and April collapse that ended with a narrow playoff miss. Ferry needed to improve the team, re-affirm

LeBron's

faith in the organization, and the \$22 million in cap space he had to work with was the only way he could do it.

This summer, possibly with the lessons of '05 learned, Ferry made up his mind that he wouldn't overpay for role players again, resulting in a frustrating offseason for fans that wanted to see the team improve upon itself after making the NBA Finals for the first time ever.

Not having draft picks is the real killer, however. Even with the Cavs' frequent draft misfires (Shannon Brown is apparently the latest), the only way for an NBA team to add to its roster yearly and still maintain long-term financial flexibility is through the draft. The

Cavs

are finally out from under all their trade obligations, and starting next summer, they'll once again have two draft picks. Ferry would also be smart to add picks whenever possible.

On the coaching front, Mike Brown is once again being chastised for his seemingly-lacking offensive game plan. Obviously, offense isn't his strong suit, but if you're calling for Brown to be fired, you haven't been paying attention to how NBA teams make it to June.

Why have the Spurs and Pistons won titles, while the Suns, Mavericks and Warriors haven't? The former two teams play defense at a high level. It is a law of nature every spring once the playoffs start: teams with superior defense beat teams with inferior defense.

The Cavs made the NBA Finals last spring for two reasons: LeBron James and Mike Brown's constant harping on defense. No other reason. No other individual performances, outside of Daniel Gibson's uprising in Game 6 against Detroit, contributed to the

Cavs

' conference title run in a standout way.

It shows that a flawed roster can, to borrow a used phrase, "rise up" when taught the right things. Brown, for all of his questionable offensive moves, did the right things to get this team to the Finals. By any measure, he did a good job as this team's coach last year.

The Cavs definitely have a ways to go before they are capable of making consistent runs deep into May and into June, but no one seems to want to give them the credit for the ground they've already covered. This is a good basketball organization controlled by guys who have the right idea. But things don't always turn out picture-perfect at first.

Living in Cleveland, you should know that bumps in the road are part of the terrain. If your resident basketball superstar's biggest sin is wearing a Yankees hat to a Yankees-Indians playoff game, count your blessings, not the days until he's a free agent.