

New Beast of the NBA East

Written by {ga=samamico}

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Our guy Sam Amico was at last night's thrilling debut for the new look Cavs, and is feeling really good about this team after seeing them together for just one game. Sam believes this Cavs team is now the team to beat in the East, and in his latest, tells us why he feels that way. Sam also has some random thoughts from last night's win and the new quartet of Cavaliers, and also had a chance to sit down with former Buckeye Mike Conley Jr, an interview we link inside.



The Cleveland Cavaliers are the best team in the Eastern Conference. They're deeper and more balanced than Boston, and unlike Detroit, they have a true superstar in **LeBron James**.

Those were my first thoughts after watching the Cavs dismantle Memphis (109-89) in their first game with four new players in uniform:

Ben Wallace

,
Wally Szczerbiak

,
Joe Smith

and

Delonte West

.
That may sound like a lot of hype after one game, especially when that game came against the struggling Grizzlies. And a lot of teams have looked good against the Grizzlies.

But after last week's trades brought in the four new players, it's obvious the Cavs have it all. They can shoot from the perimeter (James, West, Szczerbiak), score underneath (**Zydrunas Ilgauskas**), block shots and rebound (Wallace), and have a strong cast of role players (Smith,

Brown

mon Jones

). And I haven't even mentioned

Daniel Gibson

,
Anderson Varejao

and

Sasha Pavlovic

-- all out with injuries -- or the underrated coaching of

Mike Brown

.

Yes, it's good to be a Cav.

General manager **Danny Ferry** said he made the deals at last week's trading deadline because he didn't just want the Cavs to compete, he wanted them to win a title. He didn't feel the previous roster, which included

Larry Hughes

and

Drew Gooden

, was good enough to do that.

Not that Ferry had anything against Hughes and Gooden (or **Ira Newble** and **Donnell Marshall**

). After all, they were important parts of the first Cavs team to reach the Finals. But the old Cavs seemed stagnant, boring, like old news.

When James wasn't on the court, you knew they had no chance. That's not the case with the new lineup. Even without James, they'd be a pretty good team. Not a championship team, but not horrible either. And that's a world of difference from the way it used to be.

As Brown said of the new players, "They all have a good feel for the game. Even if they don't know where they should be (positioned on the court), they all understand how to pass, cut, and make a play.

The man speaks the truth, as the Cavs' half-court offense looked as good as it had all season in the Memphis game. With this lineup, we shouldn't see any more games where James just dribbles and dribbles and dribbles, and the other guys just watch and watch and watch.

If Brown has any issues with the new Cavs, it will be finding consistent minutes for everyone. That will especially be the case once the injured players return. But any coach will tell you things could be worse, that it sure beats not having enough to work with. Brown found out what that was like any time James went down.

Are the Cavs really the best team in the conference? It may not show right away (they have a biggie at Boston this week), but it's hard to imagine another team being deeper and more balanced. They have size, are strong defensively, and can still turn to James when nothing else is working.

All of that will be tough to beat, no matter who you are.

RANDOM CAVS STUFF

* The first thing I noticed about the new Cavs? Szczerbiak actually sings along to the national anthem.

* Against Memphis, Ilgauskus tapped the opening jump ball to Wallace, then came down the floor and hit the game's first shot. Basically, the Cavs have no plans to forget about the big man who's been in Cleveland longer than anyone (since 1997, or his entire career).

* Remember last year, when James dunked over West in a game in Boston? It was one of the most played highlights of the season, as West tried to take a charge and James nearly sailed right over him. A lot of 13-year olds probably have that poster in their room right now. Making things worse was the fact West was called for blocking.

* The reason I mention that is because West threw a beautiful alley-oop pass for a James jam early in their first quarter together. Guess there are no hard feelings.

* Just as I was about to scribble on my notepad that Cavs fans will be reminded of **Chris Dudley** when watching Wallace struggle at the free-throw line, Wallace buried his first two as a Cav. The second one bounced around the rim, sprung back up, hit the backboard, then fell in. Cleveland Plain Dealer reporter

Mike Pettica

just smiled at me and said, "He got the shooter's bounce."

* Smith was viewed by many as a "throw-in" in the Cavs' trade with the Bulls, but he's been one of my favorite all-around players for a long time. He's a veteran (32 years old) who knows all the tricks. Mostly, he's exactly the type of player any coach would love coming off the bench -- as Smith makes tons of hustle plays and is extremely versatile.

* I'm not positive, but I'm guessing this is the first time in Cavs history that they've had two No. 1 overall draft picks (Smith and James) on the same team. I'm sure a member of the Cavs media relations staff (or a knowledgeable reader) will correct me if I'm wrong.

* By the way, did you notice that 10-day-contract signee **Billy Thomas** took ELEVEN shots in his Cavs debut against Washington? As Pettica noted, "He probably already averages more shots per minute than Ben Wallace has for an entire career."

* Another thing about the new players: They may not have been particularly consistent before coming to Cleveland, but you can expect them to be now. Great players like James have that effect on people. And unlike Hughes, no one is expecting to be **Scottie Pippen** to James' **Michael Jordan**. They all just want a piece of the action -- and James will give it to them.

* James won't need to lead the league in scoring with this roster, and you get the sense that he's relieved. He's always wanted to be more of a "point forward" --

and for the first time in his pro career, here's his chance. He can be more unselfish than ever, which should make the Cavs more fun to watch than ever.

* Yes, I grew up in Northeast Ohio and am a national writer who's based in Cleveland. So go ahead and say I'm biased. But the truth is, I like all 30 teams the same. It's just that suddenly, this one is grabbing my attention. And no matter where you live, I expect that you will come to appreciate the new Cavs, too.

CONLEY INTERVIEW

I was having a bad day until I got the opportunity to sit down for a one-on-one interview with Grizzlies rookie point guard **Mike Conley**.

And I have to say, I felt a lot better after talking with him, both on and off the record. He was over-the-top personable and just basically made me feel good again about the future of the league.

That's not to say the former Ohio State standout is content with his occasional rookie struggles, or that the young Grizzlies are among the worst teams in the league. Far from it, as he told me his first season in the NBA has been "really weird." But he also takes pride in his winning mentality and the fact he refuses to mail it in, despite all the losing.

You can read the full interview on ProBasketballNews.com [by clicking here](#).

SEMI-PRO REVIEW

A couple of nights before the game against Cleveland, the Grizzlies watched the new **Will Ferrell** movie, "Semi-Pro." In fact, all 30 NBA clubs received an advanced screening of the movie, a comedic take on the original (and often laughable) American Basketball Association.

Grizzlies media relations man **Dustin Krugel** gave it two thumbs up, telling me he thought it was much better than either of Ferrell's past two sports-themed works, "Blades of Glory" and "Talladega Nights."

How's that for some useless information you can't find anywhere else?

VOICE OF A FAN

Reader and Cavs fan **George Thayer** (Fredericktown, Ohio) sent in this e-mail following the Cavs-Bulls-Sonics deal:

"I went online and did a (Player Efficiency Rating) for each team and the Cavs made a statistical killing in this trade. The Sonics did it for cap space, but why did the Bulls make this deal unless Big Ben was too much of a Big Pain?"

"Back to the PER. I'm not a big fan of this, but it does tell an interesting stat in this story. What the Cavs traded away, six players, is only half the collective PER of the four players they received.

"We've all been screaming, including Mike Brown, about the inconsistent play of Gooden. Not sure how long Big Ben will be happy playing here, but he's got to be thrilled about playing for a contender and next to LeBron.

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“As far as the other players, they all could work well in this system as long as they play within the system. And isn't that the way it always goes? I kind of made fun of the **Jason Kidd** trade (to Dallas) after his poor showing in his first game back with the Mavs. But it will take time for him to fit into their system. The same is true of the new Cavs fitting into the system of Mike Brown and LeBron James.”

George concluded, “The more I write this e-mail, the more pumped I am.”