

While it was widely hailed by the fans of the team, the Cavaliers blockbuster trade deadline deal most certainly made the Cavaliers older. In Erik's latest, he reminds fans that in a couple years, Big Ben and Joe Smith will be 35, Z will likely be contemplating retirement, and Andy Varejao will likely have left town as an unrestricted free agent. And that the Cavs frontline will need overhauled as LeBron approaches the end of his current deal here.



When you're trying to expedite the process of turning your team into a contender, it's difficult to do it without making it older. And once you've started down the path of building around aging veterans, it's nearly impossible to reverse the trend without commencing a major rebuilding project.

Danny Ferry held out as long as he could with a Cavaliers team built around a core of mostly 20-somethings, but for a variety of reasons, he felt a LeBron James supporting cast featuring Larry Hughes and Drew Gooden had reached the limit of what it could accomplish. And that limit stopped short of winning an NBA title.

So, as we all now know, he shipped Gooden and Hughes off to Chicago, along with back-of-the-bench youth in Cedric Simmons and Shannon Brown, as part of a three way trade that brought in a trio of 30-somethings as part of the return package.

While most Cleveland fans and media members praised the newly-acquired experience that Ben Wallace (33), Wally Szczerbiak (31) and Joe Smith (32) brought with them, the applause drowned out the collective sound of joints creaking.

There is no getting around it. By adding Wallace, Szczerbiak and Smith to a rotation that already includes 32-year-old Zydrunas Ilgauskas, the Cavs are becoming an older team, particularly in the physically-demanding and all-important frontcourt positions.

As if right on cue, within two weeks of the Feb. 21 trade, Ilgauskas was sent to the bench with recurring back pain brought on by a bulging spinal disc. His return might be a week from now, a month from now, or -- heaven forbid -- next season. Back injuries are fickle, and for Z, this is going to be a recurring plot line for the remainder of his career.

At virtually the same time, Wallace's back tightened up on him, causing him to miss a few games. He returned during the Cavs' recent road swing through New Jersey and Washington, but don't expect this to be the last time tight muscles or aching joints put Wallace out of commission during his stint in Cleveland.

Certainly, injuries can happen to any player of any age. Relative youngsters Daniel Gibson, Anderson Varejao and Sasha Pavlovic have all missed significant time with foot and ankle injuries, contributing to Cavs' inability to put themselves on a 50-win pace. It would be unfair to accuse Z, Wallace and their bad backs of being the sole saboteurs of the Cavs' apparently-futile run at the East's third seed.

But, regardless of at which pair of feet you want to place the blame for what is shaping up to be a much harder run through the Eastern Conference playoffs than last season, there is no getting around the fact that it is going to be extremely difficult for the Cavs to put an elite team on the floor if the frontcourt is a constant revolving door between the bench and the trainer's room.

With Z, Wallace, Smith and Varejao, the Cavs, at least on paper, have one of the deepest frontcourts in the league. But how often is Mike Brown really going to be able to take complete advantage of that depth? If the past three weeks are any indication, most games will find at least one of the three over-30 big men battling some kind of injury. Combine that with Varejao's flailing, thrashing style of play, and you have four bigs who are prime injury candidates.

Granted, one of the advantages of having depth is the ability to absorb injuries. But watching Brown constantly having to deactivate one or more big men with an endless stream of pulls, sprains, tweaks and inflammations is going to be like watching an anchor constantly weigh the Cavs down. The new fan mantra will

become "If this team can ever get totally healthy...."

But, chances are, that's a day that will never come. If it does come, it will be a fleeting prelude to another injury.

The arrival of Wallace and Smith did give the Cavs more toughness and experience in the low post. There is little doubt those two add different dimensions to a frontcourt that is a team strength. But skill sets can't be utilized if bodies break down. So far, the injuries to Z and Wallace do not bode well for the future.

For most of the season, the Cavs talk around town centered on adding the piece or two necessary to vault the Cavs from contender in a weak conference to true championship threat. Since the trade, the focus has shifted to maintenance and replacement parts, from adding a point guard and wing scorer to making sure the center position doesn't crumble before our eyes.

In two years, when Wallace is 35 and Z is seriously contemplating retirement, the Cavs frontcourt will be in need of a drastic overhaul. That's not the position Ferry wants to be in as LeBron approaches his contract termination option in the summer of 2010, so it would probably be the best course of action for Ferry to start formulating Cavs Frontcourt Version 2.0 this summer.

Whether it's through the draft or a trade, Ferry needs to find at least one young big man who could become a productive NBA starter in short order. In other words, no project players like Simmons. Ideally, it would be someone who could match skill sets with Z reasonably well. Maybe the Cavs don't necessarily need a young center who can consistently knock down 15-footers, but they do need a 7-footer who can rebound, score inside and get to the free-throw line.

My vote currently goes to Georgetown's Roy Hibbert, the center in the draft who I think would be able to most closely match Z's production. There is little chance Hibbert will be on the board when the Cavs select, so Ferry would almost certainly have to engineer a trade to acquire a pick high enough to select Hibbert, whom [n badraft.net](http://badraft.net) projected as going 15th overall to Phoenix as of Saturday afternoon.

There is plenty of time for speculation on what Ferry should do this summer. What there isn't a lot of time for is standing pat. Every game is another game older for Z, Wallace and Smith. And with each game, each week, their bodies get worn down

a little bit further by making a living in the NBA's mosh pits.

Without quick and decisive action by Ferry in the next year, this deep, prized frontcourt of the Cavs will become a rusty, leaking shell held together by medical bandages. It's begun already.