

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, the Cavaliers were the rally kings of the NBA. Led by the best fourth-quarter player in the league, it almost seemed like if Cleveland entered the fourth quarter trailing, they had the other team right where they wanted them. Then came The Trade. And things haven't been the same since. Erik Cassano talks about the late game execution of the new Cavs in his latest column for us.



A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, the Cavaliers were the rally kings of the NBA. Led by the best fourth-quarter player in the league, it almost seemed like if Cleveland entered the fourth quarter trailing, they had the other team right where they wanted them.

Turnovers, offensive fouls, poor shot selection, it didn't matter what missteps the Cavs

took with the game on the line. With

LeBron

holding the basketball, it was something of an inevitability that the

Cavs

were going to pull out the vast majority of hairy fourth quarter situations and put the game in the win column.

Then came The Trade. And things haven't been the same since.

Prior to the Feb. 21, 10-player, three-team trade that rocked the roster to its foundation, we could always count on the Cavs' ability to do two things with the game on the line: Score (thanks primarily to

LeBron

) and stuff the other team's best scorers with solid team defense.

Sure, the Vince Carters of the world might still go off for 40 points, but we knew they weren't going to get a crystal clear look at the basket with the fourth-quarter clock about to hit zero.

As a result, the Cavs seldom subjected us to heart-rending, soul-crushing buzzer-beater losses. They might not have been able to hit the game winner with time expiring very often, but they could definitely stop the other team from hitting the game-winner.

Since the trade, the Cavs have fallen victim to two buzzer-beaters in less than a month. In Michael Redd's 35-foot heave in Milwaukee on Feb. 26 and in

**David West's**

15-foot jumper for New Orleans Wednesday night, there were a couple of common threads -- namely, lousy clock management and poor defensive execution.

Certainly, you can chalk up Redd's heave to an answered prayer, or a great play by a great player, but it still doesn't account for the fact that the Cavs left Redd more than five seconds to take the inbounds pass, streak up the floor and get a clean look at the basket. To do that, Redd had to be the beneficiary of botched defense on the inbounds pass, and a failure to close on him in the open floor.

Seriously, how do you not do everything in your power to ensure that the one guy on the other team who can nail a 35-foot heave doesn't get the ball -- or if he does, that he's forced to give it up?

And, for Pete's sake, how on Earth is Wally "Craig Ehlo" Szczerbiak your last line of defense? After

Szczerbiak

flailed with futility at the superior-athletically-in-every-way Redd, all that was missing was a baseline shot of

Szczerbiak

crumpled to the ground by the

scorer's

table as Redd pumped his fist and screamed.

Wednesday, though West's shot wasn't a true buzzer-beater, it left the Cavs with six-tenths of a second and no timeout to advance the ball to halfcourt, so it effectively sealed the game.

As during Redd's game-winner, the Cavs left their opponent with an embarrassment of riches on the clock. You want to know how long 7.7 seconds is? Ask the guys who have to defend a team loaded with good shooters and a greased-lightning point guard for 7.7 seconds with the game on the line.

With the Cavs down by one late, LeBron steamed to the hoop for the too-easy lay-in that gave the Cavs the lead, but left the Hornets with a small eternity to get a shot off.

I'll assume that LeBron was the one who decided when to set the play in motion. We've gotten on The Chosen One before for holding the ball until about four seconds, dribbling himself into a double- or triple-team, then hoisting an off-balance 20-foot brick at the buzzer. At least we can give LeBron credit for seizing the opportunity to take a high-percentage shot. But it was still poor execution because it played right into the Hornets' hands.

If you're the opposing team and LeBron is going to take his shot for the win at eight seconds, you let him. Once he gets a head of steam going, you're not going to stop him, so why not let him drop the ball in the cup knowing that you're going to have more than five seconds to answer?

The Cavs could still have sealed the win with some solid defensive maneuvering on the final play, which the pre-trade, Mike Brown-indoctrinated Cavs would likely have accomplished. But the post-trade, hastily-thrown-together Cavs bit hard on Chris Paul's drive to the basket, flying toward him like moths to a blue light. Paul, the league's best point guard, alertly found West spotted up at the free-throw line, sickeningly wide-open for a shot he could probably make in his sleep.

As good as the Cavs looked against Detroit last week, this trend doesn't bode well for the playoffs. A great many playoff games come down to the final possession,

and it's looking more and more like this year's Cavs can't get the scores or stops they'll need to win those last-second battles. If they do get the score they need, they might get burned by leaving too much time on the clock.

Unfortunately, before the Cavs get this straightened out, we might be subjected to more of Wally Szczerbiak's Craig Ehlo impersonations. I wish I was talking about his shooting touch, but I'm not.