

After 82 regular-season games, what we know about the 2007-08 Cleveland Cavaliers is ... not much more than what we knew in November. Give LeBron and Co. credit for this much: They've succeeded in maintaining an aura of mystery for more than six months. Everything you thought you knew about this team at the outset of the season has pretty much been turned upside down. With the playoffs upon us, Erik gives us the five questions that need answered about this Cavaliers team.



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In November, the Cavs were a gritty team enduring the contract holdout of Anderson Varejao. They didn't have overwhelming talent across the board, but they had guys who could hold down the fort, keep games close with defense and give LeBron a chance to play hero in the fourth quarter. Which, in his best season yet, LeBron played very well.

But contract holdouts gave way to injuries. LeBron's finger. Sasha Pavlovic's foot. Andy's ankle. Then, possibly under pressure from both inside and outside the organization, Danny Ferry shook the roster like a giant snow globe at the February trade deadline. Larry Hughes and Drew Gooden out along with four others; Ben Wallace, Wally Szczerbiak, Delonte West and Joe Smith in.

The injuries kept coming: Daniel Gibson's ankle, Zydrunas Ilgauskas' back, Wallace's back, LeBron's back, Sasha's foot again. The net result is a team that never clicked, never found their stride like you would expect from a defending conference champion. The defense-first philosophy is out the window, largely because Mike Brown has been so busy attempting to acclimate his new players to his system (which isn't known for being easy to grasp, mind you) that he can't hammer away on defensive principles in practice the way he'd probably like.

The offense, so dependent on LeBron, fizzled as LeBron battled a back injury for most of the past month. Szczerbiak and West have shown flashes of the offensive firepower they are capable of bringing to the table, but nothing consistent enough to make fans stop fretting.

So, as we stand on the cusp of another playoff run, who are the Cleveland Cavaliers? Here are five questions that need to be answered:

1. Can LeBron continue to carry this team on offense?

It would seem foolish to bet against arguably the greatest player on the planet. But it would also be foolish to assume LeBron can continue to fight through the wear and tear of the postseason with no negative affects.

LeBron seemed to tail off toward the end of the season. Part of it was due to his back, which he says has healed. But it just didn't look like he had that great freight-train explosiveness that makes him so dangerous when he gets a path to the rim. He's also seen a rise in turnovers, many of them unforced. Maybe it can be blamed on a lack of familiarity with his new teammates, but it's also not outlandish to think that even The King could suffer from a bout of mental fatigue.

All this, and he still has to fly to China and play in the Olympics this summer.

2. Can the bigs provide the advantage they did in last year's playoffs?

The Cavs got to the NBA Finals last spring with more than a little help from their big men. The trio of Z, Gooden and Andy provided the undermanned Wizards and undersized Nets with matchup problems galore, and helped make life a little more difficult for the Pistons, too.

No surprise, then, that the Cavs made a habit of dominating the boards at both

ends of the floor, taking the opposition out of their offensive rhythm and providing the Cavs with plenty of second-shot chances. The play of their bigs was right up there with the play of LeBron and Gibson as the most important reasons the Cavs shocked the world with their first conference title.

This year, it's a whole new ballgame.

To look at the roster, you'd think the Cavs would have a great depth advantage in the frontcourt with Wallace and Smith accompanying Z and Andy. Wallace is a rugged rebounder who can step out and guard smaller players. Smith is a decent rebounder in his own right, and we already know what Z and Andy can do.

But the carousel of injuries has placed a damper on what should be a major team strength. Wallace is always one tweak away from another back flare up, Z is going down that road as well, and Andy simply hasn't been the same energy guy, at least consistently, since his January ankle sprain.

In short, we don't know what each of these guys are going to be able to give the Cavs in the playoffs, or for how long. A limping, aching frontcourt is going to drag this team down in a big way.

3. Will the real starting shooting guard please stand up?

Even before Pavlovic went down with his latest foot sprain, the shooting guard situation for the Cavs was less than desirable.

Pavs was the best choice to start because he could do the most at both ends of the floor. He is the best athlete and tallest defender of the off-guard bunch. With Pavs out of commission for at least one series, the starter's job likely falls to Devin Brown, who has performed admirably down the stretch of the season. But he's probably not a guy you want to pencil in for 40 minutes a night, which means the bench bunch of Szczerbiak, Gibson and Damon Jones becomes all the more important.

The Cavs have to get good play out of at least a couple of those guys. Unfortunately, Mike Brown will probably find himself in a situation where he has to substitute on a situational basis in an attempt to mask the shortcomings of his grab bag of two-guards. Already, we know Jones, Gibson and Szczerbiak basically bring nothing in the way of defense. Heading into a series in which

stopping Caron Butler and Gilbert Arenas will be Jobs 1 and 1a, that's not exactly comforting to know.

Ferry had better put the shooting guard spot near the top of his to-do list for the summer. The Bucks and Grizzlies, rebuilding teams that currently employ Michael Redd and Mike Miller, should be on Ferry's speed dial.

4. Can Delonte West play the point at a playoff level?

West has been in the league for a few years now, but never on a team expected to make waves in the playoffs. Now, he needs to mature in a hurry from youngster with potential to legitimate starting point guard on a veteran playoff team.

Time will tell how long the Cavs last in this year's playoffs, but if West sticks around here long enough, he'll likely find himself squaring off against the likes of Chauncey Billups, Gilbert Arenas or Mike Bibby in a high-stakes playoff series on more than one occasion.

West is already the closest thing the Cavs have had to a true point guard playing alongside LeBron. But pushing the ball against the Charlotte Bobcats in a March regular season game is light years away from tangling with Billups or Arenas with your season on the line.

The upcoming playoff series will be a baptism by fire for West. We'll soon know a lot more about whether he's a player worth building around.

5. Is Mike Brown part of the problem or part of the solution?

Fans have been passionately divided over whether Brown's coaching helps or hurts the Cavs. When fan punching bags Hughes, Gooden and Donyell Marshall were shipped out of town and the Cavs still didn't streak to the top of the standings, Brown became the new lightning rod for the fans' ire.

There is value in both arguments. On the good side, Brown did show that a team can play over its head if it knows how to play defense. The Cavs were not an elite team last year, but they played elite-level defense down the stretch and in the postseason, and it was one of the biggest factors in getting the team to the NBA Finals.

It will take time, but I have confidence that Brown will eventually get the current Cavs squad to play defense at a high level, and it will help them win games.

The offense is another issue. No matter what Brown does, the Cavs never seem to find an offensive scheme that works. Maybe it isn't all his fault, as keeping players from falling into a "stand around and watch LeBron" trance seems to be a full-time job in and of itself. But you have to wonder why a team that has a superlative offensive talent like LeBron can look so predictable, vanilla and ultimately ineffective at the offensive end sometimes.

Don't expect him to change anytime soon. Brown was, for lack of a better term, "scared" back to his defensive principles when the Cavs broke camp last fall and promptly became one of the worst defensive teams in the league. Brown immediately blamed himself for the grievous sin of eschewing defense during camp in favor of teaching offense. Bet he won't do that again.

But even with all of that offensive baggage in tow, if defense wins championships, it's hard to vote against a guy who thoroughly understands that.