

Maybe it's the pressure rendered by the prospect of losing to the same team in the first round three years in a row. Maybe someone pulled Wizards coach Eddie Jordan aside and made him believe that the toughest, most defense-minded teams usually advance in the playoffs. Maybe they're desperate. Whatever the reason, the Wizards have tried to reinvent themselves as bullies in this series. And it's not working says Erik Cassano.



When the playoffs start in the NBA, the action invariably becomes more intense. Players foul harder, tempers flare, shoving matches sometimes result.

Occasionally, someone will cross the line and earn himself a technical foul. On rare occasions, someone might even jump way over the line and get slapped with that scarlet letter of NBA discipline, the flagrant foul (I'm looking at you, Rasheed Wallace).

Most of the time, it's an accepted part of the high-stakes dance of the playoffs. Players aren't setting out to maul their opponents; they just want to win and get to June.

Then there's the Washington Wizards, the team the Cavaliers have had both the fortune and misfortune to meet in the first round for the third straight year.

At their best, the Wizards are the Eastern Conference poor man's version of the Phoenix Suns. They are fronted by three capable scorers in Gilbert Arenas, Caron Butler and Antawn Jamison. Those three are surrounded by a battalion of

serviceable role players like Brendan Haywood, Antonio Daniels, Andray Blatche and the man everyone in Cleveland knows and loves, DeShawn Stevenson. Running the show is a highly-underrated coach in Eddie Jordan.

The Wizards have been a playoff participant for four straight years, largely on the shooting, penetrating and rebounding of their big three. They win with offense primarily. Defense isn't a completely foreign concept to them, but it would be fair to say 80-75 is not their ideal final score.

They've had decent success playing that way for almost half a decade, probably about as much success as you could expect from a team that has a good-but-not-great roster and lacks a true superstar to offset that fact as the Cavs do. Which makes the Wizards' sudden shift to Rick Mahorn disciples rather confusing.

Maybe it's the pressure rendered by the prospect of losing to the same team in the first round three years in a row. Maybe someone pulled Jordan aside and made him believe that the toughest, most defense-minded teams usually advance in the playoffs. Maybe they're desperate. Maybe they're flaky. But whatever is happening, the Wizards are drilling holes in the hull of their already-sinking ship with this messy attempt at physically intimidating the Cavs -- and, of course, LeBron in particular -- into submission.

The Wizards don't have the personnel or the practice to play that type of ball, and it shows. Strange as it might sound, there is an art form to inflicting pain but doing it in a clean enough fashion that you don't get players ejected or start a melee under the basket. You can send a message and still make it look like you're going for the ball.

Maybe the Wizards tried that early in Game 1 and decided it wouldn't work to stop all 6'-9" and 260 pounds of LBJ. They're probably right. So instead of going back to the binge scoring they execute so well, they decided to kick the dirty play up a notch in Game 2.

An aggressive shove to the back from Arenas to Wally Szczerbiak when Sczcerbiak was attempting to back the smaller Arenas down in the post. Haywood's Hack-a-Bron tactics that culminated with his overzealous shove of LeBron in the third quarter and subsequent ejection.

Before we paint the Cavs as helpless victims, they did their part, too. Anderson Varejao was whistled for a flagrant foul for using his arm as a club in the first half. Ben Wallace was guilty of a karate chop in the first half that netted him a good, old-fashioned personal foul. So pain was being administered on both sides.

But what the Wizards are doing seems to go deep, and some might say too far. Their thug tactics are aimed at inflicting pain, and quite possibly injury, on LeBron, the man for whom they have no answer.

It's the kind of play you fear when you play tough-guy teams like the Pistons. But Detroit at least knows how to play aggressive defense and commit hard fouls within the rules of the game. Telling the Wizards to play that way is like telling a 16-year-old with a newly-minted driver's license to speed down a crowded freeway at rush hour and not wreck 20 cars in the process.

The 16-year-old probably thinks he can do it. As an experienced driver, you know better.

So for at least two more games, we have to entrust the safety of our superstar to three referees, a handful of teammates and, if it gets that far, the NBA Commissioner's Office. Meanwhile, the Wizards will probably continue to live in a fantasy world where they can use their massive girth and sharp elbows to dissuade LeBron and his teammates from venturing into the paint. And if that doesn't work, hey, there's always upending LeBron in midair and hoping he lands squarely on his head.

The Cavs are halfway done with disposing of this apparently-delusional team. Here's hoping they win the next two and end this series as quickly as possible, before something really bad happens.