

Game 3 of the Celtics-Cavaliers series will tip at just after 8 p.m. tonight. Obviously, this game and Monday's game are must-wins for the Cavs to even have a shot. Go down 3-0 or 3-1, and the offseason will arrive on Cleveland's doorstep. As we all get geared up for tonight's big game, Papa Cass chimes in with some last minute random thoughts on tonight's tilt, Mike Brown, and the face of the Eastern Conference next season. GO CAVS!



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I'm torn, to be honest. On one hand, this series isn't over. On the other hand, getting unceremoniously dropped by the Celtics in four or five games would send a message to Danny Ferry and Cavs management that they, in no uncertain terms, have to be very proactive in improving the team this summer.

Of course my first choice is for the Cavs to do what they did against the Pistons a year ago and win four straight, gaining an avalanche of momentum in the process. But I also know that this Celtics team is probably better than the Pistons have ever been at any point during the past five years, their 2004 title included. That's really saying something. Boston has star power that is unmatched in the NBA and is capable of dominating games at both ends of the floor.

So the stark reality is that the Cavs, no matter how good they play the rest of the way, are going to have an extremely difficult time winning four of the next five from Boston. Even if they do, the winner of the Detroit-Orlando series awaits in the East finals. If the Cavs somehow won that series, a titan of the West would await

in the NBA Finals.

In short, the Cavs ain't winning a title this year. Generally, teams that win 45 regular season games don't win titles. Which brings me to my first point:

1. Want to win a title? Win more games between November and April.

The common opinion among fans and media is that the NBA regular season is meaningless. Sixteen of 30 teams qualify for the playoffs, which can drag on for more than two months, so it would appear that the five and one-half month, 82-game march called the regular season is nothing more than a wintertime diversion meant to line the league's pockets with dough.

The part about lining the league's pockets is true. But the idea that good teams can just develop a "wake me when the playoffs start" mentality is entirely false. I'd venture to say home advantage is more important in the NBA than in any other league.

I can't put my finger on an overarching reason why, but the knowledge that you're going to play the first two games of a series at home, in front of a loud home crowd, shooting at rims that you've been shooting at all season, seems to put the team with homecourt advantage on firmer footing than the team that has to go into a hostile road arena and try to win one of the first two.

The home teams won the first 10 games of the second round, so there must be some validity to that argument.

In a nutshell, the Cavs, for a variety of reasons, some of which were beyond their control as an organization, didn't win enough games during the regular season to penetrate deep into the playoffs. To beat Boston without homecourt advantage, then try to beat Detroit or Orlando without homecourt if they should somehow squeak past the Celtics, it all seems like too much to ask.

But if we're talking about a Cavs team with homecourt advantage against the likes of the Celtics, Pistons and Magic, suddenly it doesn't seem like as daunting of a task.

It would seem that if a team wants to realistically have a shot to win a title, it had better win between 55 and 60 games during the regular season, minimum. With

the contracts Danny Ferry will have to trade this summer, it would seem like the Cavs will finally have a shot to win 55 or 60 games next year with the right roster moves this summer.

2. The Knicks (yes, the Knicks) are making me nervous.

In speaking of roster moves this summer, the New York Knicks could be a team to watch, and that concerns me.

No, it doesn't have anything to do with maneuvering to capture LeBron in two years. It has everything to do with the desperate Knicks trying to emulate the Celtics' stunning turnaround.

Saturday, the Knicks reportedly hired Mike D'Antoni as their new coach. The Suns cut him loose in what I think will end up being a very short-sighted move in the ultra-competitive Western Conference. D'Antoni will take his high-flying offense act to New York in an attempt to revive the flatlining Knicks.

That alone doesn't scare me. But the ramifications for the summer do.

The Knicks, like the Cavs, will have a small fortune in expiring deals to trade this summer. They still have plenty of heavy contracts weighing them down for the next couple of years, but the deals of Stephon Marbury (\$19 million this year), Jerome James (nearly \$6 million) and Malik Rose (\$7 million) could all potentially enter their final years this summer, making them all-too-valuable expiring contracts the Knicks can use in trades.

Normally, it might be the safest and smartest route for a Nowheresville franchise like the Knicks to simply let those contracts come off the books after next season (or this season -- Marbury has an early termination option), regain some financial flexibility and attempt to rebuild through the draft. But the Knicks just watched the arch-rival Celtics acquire Ray Allen and Kevin Garnett, subsequently performing the biggest one-season turnaround in league history, going from a 24-win dreg to a 66-win title favorite in one year.

Knicks management might be looking at the Celtics and figuring "That could be us next year." The fact that they've reportedly brought in D'Antoni and his exciting brand of basketball seems to indicate that they're not expecting to sit around and wait for LeBron or anybody else to land in their lap.

How does this affect the Cavs? The Knicks and Cavs might set their sights on many of the same players this summer, and man, would it suck to head out onto the trade market and get leapfrogged for the likes of Michael Redd by the Knicks. Especially as the Cavs are trying to convince LeBron that the Knicks are a team he shouldn't want to play for.

If the Knicks emerge from the offseason in better shape than the Cavs, there will be a lot of justifiably angry Cleveland fans out there.

3. The charade known as Mike Brown's offense has to end after this season.

Mike Brown has been given three years to come up with an offense that works. It hasn't happened. The total blame doesn't rest on his shoulders because Ferry hasn't acquired a real point guard or a star-caliber compliment for LeBron. But even without an elite sidekick or a "pure" point guard, you'd still probably think Brown could find more creative ways to utilize the game's greatest all-around offensive player.

Instead, the offense frequently grinds to a halt as LeBron is left dribbling the ball at the top of the key. He's the starter, finisher, facilitator, he has to create his own shots and the shots for his teammates. Of course, he's a superstar and the team leader, so he should be expected to do most of the heavy lifting. But Brown's so called offensive "coaching" seems to say "LeBron knows more about offense than me, so let's just put the ball in his hands and let him do his thing."

If LeBron or Brown stumble into something that works, the Cavs will inexplicably stop doing it five minutes later, kind of like when Bartolo Colon used to blow batters away with fastballs in the first inning, then come out throwing curveballs in the second inning.

The offense is disjointed, frequently stagnant and totally unimaginative. Brown rightly preaches defense as the path to a title, but the lack of a workable offense is a disservice to LeBron and a definite factor in the Cavs' inability to reach the 55-to-60 win plateau.

Offense and defense can coexist. The Celtics are proving that right before the Cavs' eyes. Heck, Gregg Popovich, the Yoda to the young Jedi knights of Ferry and Brown, has harmoniously balanced offense and defense on his way to four

NBA titles.

If Brown can't or won't make offense happen, someone on that coaching staff needs to. If Brown continues to stubbornly resist an offensive assistant, then it's time for Ferry, or even Dan Gilbert, to step in and put his foot down. If Brown still resists, well ... I don't want to see him fired, but at that point, Brown would be standing in the way of progress. And if Brown truly is following the San Antonio model, he should be all about progress.