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After the trade, fans expected to see a rejuvenated Cavs club free of the masonry work of Larry Hughes and Donyell Marshall, free of the space cadet antics of Drew Gooden, free of having a roster rounded out with miscellaneous, non-contributing flotsam like Shannon Brown and Cedric Simmons.

It didn't quite work out that way for the remainder of the regular season. The rebuilt Cavs, with Delonte West, Wally Szczerbiak, Ben Wallace and Joe Smith on board, sputtered to the finish line with a .500 post-trade record that had fans ready to write this team off as first-round dog meat in the playoffs, which would have meant another trip back to the ol' drawing board for Ferry.

But even though the Cavs made postseason life a lot harder on themselves by winning a mere 45 games during the just-completed regular season, trades like

February's aren't made with an eye toward the regular season. They're made to pay off in the playoffs.

Results were inconclusive in the Washington series. Wallace and Smith had their moments, but then again, so did Gooden and Hughes in previous playoff runs. Szczerbiak was sterling in the Game 2 blowout, but didn't do a whole heck of a lot the rest of the series. West proved himself to be a competent ball handler and he clinched Game 4 with the biggest shot of his career so far, but that didn't mean anyone was going to confuse him with Chris Paul or Tony Parker.

The Cavs didn't need many big contributions from their new guys against Washington, mainly because the Wizards couldn't have solved LeBron James with a slide rule, Stephen Hawking's brain or any other study aid.

The Wizards were purely and simply incapable of stopping LeBron long enough for it to make a difference in the series. It was, is, and probably will continue to be that way for as long as LeBron repeatedly meets Gilbert Arenas and Co. in the postseason.

Against Boston, different story. And it's under these pressure cooker circumstances that we are starting to see what Ferry likely envisioned when he made the trade.

Boston's defense has vexed LeBron more than any defense he's yet faced in postseason play, aside from the clamp job done by the Spurs in last year's Finals, which was aided by LeBron's fatigue from almost singlehandedly carrying the Cavs past the Pistons in the conference finals.

In four games, LeBron has topped out at 21 points in Games 2, 3 and 4, on 25, 31 and 35 percent shooting, respectively. For most players, three 21-point efforts would be fantastic. For LeBron, it's a stunning drop in production. Only in Game 4's 88-77 victory did he look anywhere close to in control of his game, attacking the rim and not settling for outside jumpers as he did in the first three games.

LeBron hasn't been neutralized -- that might be nearly impossible for an opposing defense to accomplish -- but the Celtics' staunch defense diluted his effect on particularly the first three games of the series. Even in Game 4, he was a mere 7-for-20 from the floor.

Yet the Cavs are right back in the series with a chance to pull ahead if they can finally get the Celtics to trip up at home on Wednesday night. In previous years, a confounded LeBron likely meant a Cavs loss. But this edition of the Cavs is showing things we didn't see at the end of the regular season. This Cavs team can find ways around a defense that is stuffing LeBron, thanks in no small measure to the new guys, who have given this team different ways to produce points at the offensive end, and stops at the defensive end.

Maybe a second star player to pair with LeBron is what is truly standing between the Cavs and a playoff run that doesn't seem like so much of an uphill battle. But there is something to be said for a battalion of serviceable role players surrounding your superstar.

Keep in mind that a year ago at this time, Mike Brown was relying on Sasha Pavlovic, Eric Snow and Hughes to shoulder the bulk of backcourt minutes. This year, it's West, Szczerbiak and Daniel Gibson, who didn't really appear on the radar in a big way until the Eastern Conference Finals a year ago.

Pavlovic plays good defense sometimes. He shoots the ball well sometimes. He drives to the hoop and gets blocked sometimes. And now, though he is fully recovered from an ankle sprain, he's only playing sometimes.

Snow's career was close to being over a year ago. Now it appears a lingering knee injury will indeed end his career. Hughes' shooting woes have been documented ad nauseum. If he wasn't playing defense at a high level, he wasn't contributing.

Contrast that with the new members of the current trio. While West hasn't been totally consistent (He flat-out stunk in the first two games in Boston, but what Cav didn't?), he already has a game-winning shot to his credit in the playoffs, and he bounced back from his Boston woes with 21 points in Game 3. He also has an ability to penetrate and create inside, not the strong suit of any previous Cavs point guard in the LeBron Era.

Szczerbiak has had games of 13, 13, 14 and 16 against Boston thus far, including seven three-pointers. It's not great production, but it's consistent, and a far cry from Hughes or Pavlovic following up a 14-point game with a four-point game on 2-for-14 shooting.

The big men, Wallace and Smith, haven't put up great numbers on most nights, but as seasoned veterans, they have shown they know how to step up their games in crunch time. Smith, in particular, had a marvelous stretch in Games 3 and 4, knocking down clutch jumpers and grabbing big rebounds, including a board that helped to seal Game 4.

The best part about the quartet Ferry acquired? They all have a place on the floor in the fourth quarter. Certainly, Brown has to be wary of opposing teams resorting to "Hack-a-Ben" in an attempt to send the historically-putrid free throw shooter to the line late in games, but unlike Gooden, Hughes or Marshall, Wallace doesn't disappear late in games. When healthy, he can still contribute with some degree of defense and rebounding, meaning Brown can at least have him as an option.

In previous years, Brown had to ride it out with LeBron, Gibson, Anderson Varejao, Zydrunas Ilgauskas and maybe one or two other hot hands as the small band he could count on in the clutch. Now, Brown can go nine or 10 deep on the bench with late-game options.

Say what you will about Brown's competency as a late-game lineup manager, but it makes a coach's job a lot easier when he knows he has multiple lineup options available at winning time. It has certainly helped the Cavs get back into the series.

The Cavs are still fighting an uphill battle to go deep into this postseason. That course was set long before the playoffs began. But the longer the Cavs endure in the playoffs, and the more intense the competition gets, the better Ferry's late-season, trade-deadline gamble looks.