

## Mike Brown's Report Card

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Wednesday, May 14 2008 7:00 PM -

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Visit our message forums in the wake of any playoff loss by the Cavaliers and you'll be sure to find a cross section of Cavaliers fans in there calling for Mike Brown's head. Despite an appearance in the NBA Finals, the Cavaliers coach comes under constant criticism from the Cavalier Nation for the teams at times maddening struggles running the half court offense. As we head into game 6 of the Celtics series, Nick Allburn took some time out for us to provide a comprehensive analysis of Mike Brown the coach.



No Cleveland team has enjoyed more recent success than the Cavaliers. Coached by Mike Brown and fueled by the superhuman powers of LeBron James, the Cavs have reached the Eastern Semifinals in three consecutive seasons. Down three games to two to the Boston Celtics, the Cavaliers still have a legitimate chance to make the Eastern Finals for the second straight year. Conventional wisdom would suggest that a coach like Mike Brown, who's made the playoffs three years in a row, would be revered; not the case. While Brown should by no means be immune to valid criticism, both message boards and talk shows are abuzz with fans calling for Brown's dismissal.

Coaching professional sports can be a tricky business; when a team is winning the coach is often too generously praised, and when a team is losing the coach can be a convenient scapegoat. The funny thing about all of the screaming to axe Coach Brown is that it comes in the midst of the most success the Cavaliers franchise has ever experienced.

Most of the complaints about Brown pertain to the team's offense. While the Cavaliers' offense certainly stagnates from time to time and has room for improvement, one can't employ such tunnel vision when evaluating a coach. In

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other words, if we're going to judge Coach Brown, we need to consider everything that he does (good and bad), not just one facet of his job. Let's take a closer look at what Mike Brown brings to the table.

Author's note: these grades are far from scientific, they're based solely on my insight and analysis. I still expect them to make more sense than [Mel Kiper's](#)

### Offense

We'll start with offense, which is without a doubt the aspect of his job for which Brown takes the most heat. The Cavs have a wide variety of offensive talents, but the obvious headliner is LeBron James. James is a unique talent, with the ability to drive for layups practically at will, an above average jump shot, superb ball handling skills, and athleticism that borders on supernatural. But beyond James, the only other offensive blue-chipper on the roster is Zydrunas Ilgauskas.

Ilgauskas is one of the best jump shooting centers in the league, and only Yao (bling bling) Ming might be able to give Z a run for his money. In addition to being able to stretch the floor, Ilgauskas is a terrific offensive rebounder, scoring several points per game via tip-in following an offensive rebound ( [some say](#) he's "the best tip drill man in the league").

Beyond Z, there are some quality shooters who aren't great ball handlers, namely Daniel Gibson, Damon Jones, and Delonte West, with West being the best fit for the point guard position out of the three. Sasha Pavlovic is a decent offensive player who can shoot a little and create off the dribble, but he's been unable to find a rhythm this season due injuries and his holdout. Devon Brown can slash to the rim from time to time, but he isn't a very good outside shooter.

Anderson Varejao and Ben Wallace are defensive players who basically non-factors on offense. Joe Smith is a quality scoring big man to bring off the bench. Rounding things out are resident stiffs Dwayne Jones (averages more fouls than points per game) and Wally Szczerbiak (he can score, but for every good shooting night he has three that are atrocious). Outside of LeBron James, this is a team of stand-still shooters who simply aren't all that talented offensively. The "Showtime" Lakers, these guys are not.

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Conceding that this isn't an overly talented club on offense, Mike Brown's offense doesn't seem particularly creative. The James/Ilgaukas pick and fade is the only play that consistently succeeds, and otherwise much of the team's success depends on LeBron's ability to drive the lane and either score or kick the ball out to an open shooter. This lack of set plays (or quality plays, as is more likely the case) makes the Cavs far more prone to "LeBron watching"; just standing around waiting for James to make something happen.

More than anything, the Cavs need a guard (not necessarily a point guard) who can slash to the rim and complement LeBron. If Danny Ferry can find this type of player, and that might be a possibility over the summer with all of the [expiring contracts](#)

the Cavs will have, it would take pressure off of LeBron and keep opposing defenses honest. Larry Hughes had the ability to be that slasher that the Cavs so desperately need(ed), but Hughes was rendered largely ineffective by his intense love of his jump shot and his reluctance to drive into the lane.

While Brown lacks dynamic offensive talent with the exceptions of James and Ilgauskas, that doesn't excuse the Cavaliers' penchant to become inert on offense for minutes at a time. Complaints about the Cleveland offense bear verity, but as frustrating as it is, this offense is going nowhere for the time being. In a few weeks (or hopefully months, rather) when they're out of the playoffs, the Cavs will certainly revisit their offense, but for now fans will just have to grind their teeth and gut it out.

Like last summer, I will advocate the hiring of a wizard offensive assistant to help Brown in his weakest area. It was troubling when the Cavs didn't make such a move on the coaching staff last year, and if they fail to do so this season it should be viewed as a major indication that this club isn't very good at identifying and addressing their internal weaknesses. That isn't the mark of a quality organization.

And one more thing: Brown appears to adopt new offensive schemes on a whim. Doesn't it seem like Coach Brown is installing a new offense every summer? This could mean a combination of two things; either 1) Brown realizes that his offense stinks and is grasping at straws for a more effective version, and/or 2) Brown is easily taken in by trendy new offenses. While it would be encouraging to know that Brown was aware of his offense's problems, it would be equally disappointing to know that he's thus far been unable to instate an offense that can perform with

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any consistency.

### Grade: D

#### Defense

Nobody is denying Mike Brown's strength: defense, or more specifically, team defense. When Coach Brown arrived in Cleveland he started the painful process of remaking the Cavs into a defense-first team, partly in the mold of the San Antonio Spurs. Like the Spurs, the Cavs were going to rebound, play solid defense, and let their star player (in this case LeBron James, as opposed to Tim Duncan) take over late in the game. That was ultimately the formula that carried the Cavaliers all the way to the NBA Finals last year.

This transition didn't happen overnight, due largely to the Cavs' roster being filled with players more known for their offense than their defense. With the exceptions of Larry Hughes and Eric Snow, the Cavs didn't have players who were lauded for their defensive prowess. Given the circumstances, Brown was forced to turn lemons into lemonade.

Brown convinced Sasha Pavlovic that if Pavlovic wanted to play, he had to shore up his defense. Under Brown's tutelage, LeBron James has developed into an above average, and borderline premier defender. Coach Brown has kept Zydrunas Ilgauskas, a huge defensive liability, from being exploited by opposing teams.

This year Brown was faced with the challenge integrating four new players and waving 'goodbye' to his best perimeter defender, Larry Hughes, at mid-season. The upside to losing Hughes was that it allowed the Cavaliers to add Ben Wallace. Wallace, although not the beast on the inside that he once was, still plays above average interior defense.

Below are the Cavs' points allowed in the playoffs for each of the last three seasons.

**2006:** 93.5 (13 games, including 2 overtime games)

**2007:** 86.7 (20 games, 1 overtime game)

**2008:** 87.9 (through 10 games)

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Even when forced to add four new players to the rotation, Mike Brown's 2008 squad has thus far performed similarly to their '07 counterparts. Brown deserves kudos for that. Once again, if the Cavs advance to the Eastern Finals it will be more a result of their defense than their offense.

If there is one small flaw with Mike Brown's defense that usually isn't taken advantage of by opponents, it's the way the big men rotate to defend the pick and roll. We frequently see Zydrunas Ilgauskas at the top of the key, sometimes even beyond the three-point line, in an effort to defend the pick and roll. This leaves adversaries with a golden opportunity to send their forward/center to the hoop, wide open for an easy layup. Why teams don't identify and exploit this flaw is beyond me. (The team that frequently burned the Cavs when Z showed high was New Jersey.)

At any rate, the Cavaliers should actually become a better defensive team as they re-shape the roster to fit Mike Brown's scheme. The Cavs have some big contracts coming off the books next season which will allow them flexibility in the trade (2008) and free agent (2009) markets, and there's a rumor that they will have some of those cool "draft pick" things this year. After two quiet summers, the Cavs should look to make big improvements this year.

**Grade: A-**

### Intangibles

To "grade" intangibles almost seems contradictory, but I'll give it my best shot. The allotment of playing time and the management of a rotation is probably one of the easiest parts of coaching to criticize. As the saying goes, hindsight is 20-20, and it's always easy to ask "Why didn't you play this guy instead of that guy?"

With that in mind, Coach Brown needs to make some adjustments to his handling of the rotation. Brown doesn't seem to play favorites, but he definitely has a dog house. Exhibit A: Damon Jones. Jones is a lousy defender, but the guy makes baskets. Jones was having his best season in Wine & Gold, shooting over 41-percent from downtown. Due to his defensive shortcomings, Jones couldn't buy playing time down the stretch and he's only seen a few minutes during garbage time in these playoffs.

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While Jones shouldn't get starting minutes, he's a three-point specialist who can help the Cavaliers by making threes at a high percentage. Considering the Cavs' desperate need for guys who can consistently knock down those long distance shots, to rule out playing Jones altogether is nothing short of lunacy.

And then there's Wally Szczerbiak, whose promotion to the starting lineup over Devon Brown has become something of a sticking point for me during these playoffs. I'll concede that when he's on, Szczerbiak is more valuable than Brown in the starting five. But the problem is that Szczerbiak is cold far more often than he's hot. When cold, Szczerbiak is a huge defensive liability. In 10 playoff games, Szczerbiak has basically had 3 good games, and 7 that weren't so good.

Mike Brown needs some sort of litmus test to determine whether or not to give Wally is hot. Maybe give Szczerbiak five minutes at the start of the game, and if he isn't hitting his shots, sit him down? That's the best I can come up with.

Another curious trait inherent to the Cavaliers during the Mike Brown era is the club's tendency to play up or down to its level of competition. Over the last few years the Cavs have blown dozens of games to lousy teams, and there's no excuse for that. On the other hand, the Cavs have risen up to defeat teams that were probably their superior almost as often as they've phoned it in against the dregs of the league. So as much as Brown can be bashed for letting his team play flat and uninspired against the NBA's bottom feeders, he deserves credit for the Cavaliers' propensity to play their best against the cream of the crop.

This season has presented the Cavaliers with some unique challenges. Whether it was getting the team to gel after the big trade, enduring the holdouts of Pavlovic and Varejao, persevering through injuries to Gibson, Gooden, Ilgauskas, James, Pavlovic, Varejao, Wallace, et cetera, the Cavaliers have bent, but they've never broken. The one constant through all of the team's woes was Mike Brown. As much as his critics may not want to admit it, Brown kept the Cavs together this season, as he continuously kept them focused on the next game, and not on offering excuses.

But perhaps the most important intangible that Brown brings to table -- one that is frequently overlooked -- is that LeBron James seems to like him. Whether "old school" fans like it or not, the short-term and long-term fate of the franchise is dependent almost solely on keeping Flight 23 in the Forest City. To do so, the Cavs should do just about everything short of busting James out of

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prison in order to keep their 23-year old superstar happy. Retaining a head coach that seems to have King James' stamp of approval is a must, and James' endorsement is a huge plus for Mike Brown.

**Grade: B**

### Verdict

There's plenty to like about Mike Brown; he's a brilliant defensive mind, he keeps the team focused on themselves, not external forces out of their control, and he is well-liked by most of the players, most notably LeBron James. Brown also isn't without his shortcomings; his offensive schemes are overly simplistic and the Cavs have been prone to long scoring droughts, he sometimes can't see the forest through the trees (Damon Jones' ability to make shots vs. Damon Jones' defense), and he has thus far been unable to get the Cavs to treat every game with an equal level of importance.

All things considered, to advocate sacking Brown at this point completely premature. Give the Cavs another off-season to add a player to be the figurative Robin to LeBron's Batman, and bring in an offensive assistant coach to help Brown revise his scheme, and I'm betting most of these problems will be rectified. If a year from now the Cavs have that second fiddle and their own version of Rob Chudzinski, yet they still have the same problems, then discussion of whether or not Brown should be canned will be valid. Until such a time, fans simply need to be patient.