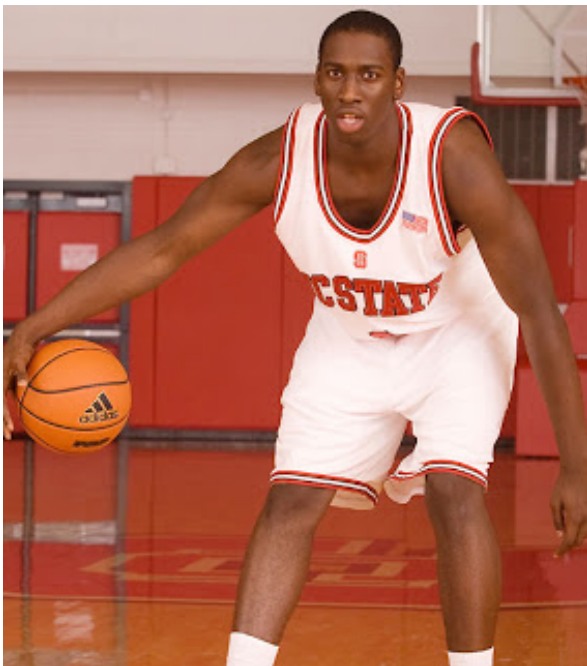


We dispatched Erik Cassano out to the Cavaliers draft party at the Winking Lizard in Lakewood last night to capture the live fan reaction to last night's first round selection. What he got was stunned silence. After weeks and weeks of hearing about Speights and Koufos and Hibbert and Darrell Arthur and Brandon Rush and Chris Douglas-Roberts, the man Ferry ultimately selected was a guy completely off our radars. Papa Cass talks about the pick, and talks about J.J. Hickson in his latest for us.



The Cavaliers draft party at the Winking Lizard in Lakewood was a cauldron of sound Thursday. A restaurant packed with Cavs fans who showed up for the draft, the drinks, the contests, the scantily-clad Cavalier Girls working the crowd and -- just in case you didn't get enough of it during the season -- the opportunity to have TV announcer Fred McLeod and pregame emcee Ahmaad yell in your ear for three hours.

Tension was building with each passing pick. In the home stretch leading the Cavs pick, potential targets Marreese Speights and Roy Hibbert went off the board, thickening the plot.

When the 19th pick finally arrived, it seemed Danny Ferry would have two logical choices -- the best two players left on ESPN's draft board, Ohio State's Kosta Koufos and Kansas' Darrell Arthur.

I expected a loud juxtaposition of cheers and boos when the Cavs' selection was announced. Fans are typically divided like that when it comes to draft picks. If it was Koufos, the Ohio State fans in the crowd would be thrilled, while the anti-Euro-stiff crowd would be calling for Ferry's immediate dismissal.

The clock hit zero for the Cavs. No sign of NBA Commissioner David Stern to announce the pick. What seemed like a minute passed. Still no Stern. We started whipping ourselves into a frenzy. The Cavs made a trade! They got Michael Redd! Or Elton Brand! Milwaukee or another team is going to be making this pick while Ferry walks away with LeBron's Pippen!

Fans and media love to get hyped on that sort of thing. When Stern approached the podium, we expected something big. What we got was...

*"With the 19th pick in the 2008 NBA Draft, the Cleveland Cavaliers select .... [pause for dramatic effect] .... J.J. Hickson, from North Carolina State."*

The crowd took in a deep collective breath as the pick was announced, ready to cheer or boo or just explode in general. When Hickson's name was announced, we all ... just exhaled. No cheering, no booing, no passionate response whatsoever. Just stunned silence.

After the silence became a murmur again, one fan, making a quick departure, yelled to the crowd, "Trade Ferry! He sucks!"

After weeks and weeks of hearing about Speights and Koufos and Hibbert and Darrell Arthur and Brandon Rush and Chris Douglas-Roberts, the man Ferry ultimately selected was a guy completely off our radars, and guy who many in the Winking Lizard crowd had probably never heard of.

Even I didn't know that much about him. My initial reaction was much like the others around me: J.J. Who? A 19-year-old freshman from N.C. State? This isn't the type of pick that will convince LeBron to stay, or help the Cavs win a championship in the next two years. If this guy can contribute big minutes prior to 2011, it will be a miracle.

Once the initial wave of emotion passed and I started to get a better read on Hickson, however, the pick made a bit more sense.

Hickson is too inexperienced for me to consider him an ideal use of the 19th pick, especially when Arthur and

K

oufos

were left on the board. But we're not talking about a bloody-side-of-beef raw prospect here. He was an All-

ACC

honorable mention as a freshman. He led all ACC freshmen in averaging 14.8 points and 8.5 rebounds per game. You can throw out the point total because there is no way on Earth

Hickson

is going to average 14.8 points per game in the NBA anytime soon.

But pay attention to the high rebound total. This is why Ferry and Mike Brown were drawn to him. At 6'-9" and more than 240 pounds, Hickson projects as a solid -- maybe even very good -- NBA rebounder and defender. He has the size to not get pushed around in the paint and on the block, and since he was only heading into his sophomore year of college, there is reason to believe he can pack on more muscle as he refines his technique.

Unless he hits a growth spurt to get closer to seven feet, Hickson's ability to play multiple positions in the NBA might be limited

But there are ways around a lack of height. Six-foot-nine guys have excelled at both the power forward and center spots in the pro game, and once team activities begin,

Hickson

will learn from one of the best undersized

biggs

of the past 10 years, Ben Wallace, who has made a career out of valuing technique and know-how over size and supreme athleticism.

That's another plus for Hickson. He has more athletic ability than Wallace had in his prime, and the hope on the part of

Cavs management is probably that he'll be able to combine his natural talent with what he learns from the

Cavs

' wise, aging gurus of the

frontcourt

to become a difference maker on the next level.

Hickson has hops and size, is built to do the dirty-work aspects of the game and is headed into a good situation for a young frontcourt player. That is the thumbs-up portion of drafting him. The thumbs-down portion centers not really on

Hickson

, but on the

LeBron

Clock.

Can Hickson contribute in any meaningful way as the Cavs attempt to win an NBA title in the next two years? As I mentioned in my previous column

, any pick Ferry made at 19 would likely have to be made with an eye toward 2010 and beyond.

That's the type of rough-edged player available at 19.

But with LeBron's possible July 2010 opt-out date drawing ever closer, the players Ferry picks up, be they via trades, free agency or the first round of the draft, have to be able to give the team some kind of production this coming year and next. The need to win is simply too urgent to be running an NBA nursery school at the end of the bench, teaching rookies like Hickson the ABCs of the pro game while they average four points and one rebound in limited action.

Every major move Ferry makes doesn't have to yield a star, but it does have to yield a player who can step in and contribute right away. That's especially true in the case of Hickson, who might be pressed into significant minutes if Ferry ends up dealing the expiring contracts of Anderson Varejao and/or Joe Smith in a trade later this summer.

The Cavs did make a pair of second-round moves to further fortify the frontcourt, acquiring Kansas forward Darnell Jackson from the Heat for a future second-rounder, and teammate Sasha Kaun, whose rights were purchased from the Sonics. Jackson is a power forward, Kaun a center. Kaun is expected to play in Russia next year according to The Plain Dealer.

Given the fact that the Cavs have had decent luck developing second-rounders in the past five years or so, the 6'-8" Jackson -- who averaged more than 11 points and led the national championship Jayhawks with 6.8 rebounds per game -- might become a nice insurance policy if Hickson isn't ready to contribute next season.

But Jackson or Hickson, preferably both, need to contribute in some meaningful way on the court starting next year. If they're stapled to the end of the bench, watching the vast majority of games from the Lance Allred seats, this draft was a bust, at least in the short term.

As much as Ferry and Brown need to look to the future as three of their main frontcourt players inch further into their 30s, there is no way around the fact that LeBron's contract means Ferry's moves will be judged in their impact on the team between now and 2010.