

Entering his sixth season, LeBron has won a scoring title, an Olympic gold medal, a conference title and, somewhere way back in the yellowing pages of history, the 2004 Rookie of the Year award. For LeBron James, an NBA world championship is perhaps the only major accomplishment -- other than winning the NBA MVP award -- that the 23-year-old has yet to achieve. Erik Cassano talks about his quest.



Some win it quickly. Magic Johnson won his first as a rookie, as did Bill Russell. Larry Bird won it in his sophomore season.

Some take a bit more time. Michael Jordan won it in his seventh season. Shaquille O'Neal and Wilt Chamberlain in their eighth.

Some take the balance of their careers. Kevin Garnett had to wait until his 13th season. Clyde

Drexler

until his 12

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But all of them have hoisted the Larry O'Brien NBA Championship Trophy.

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Entering his sixth season, LeBron has won a scoring title, an Olympic gold medal, a conference title and, somewhere way back in the yellowing pages of history, the

2004 Rookie of the Year award.

It's been repeated again and again, but it bears yet another mention: LeBron was the most-hyped, most-ballyhooed basketball player in history at age 18. A cynical public and skeptical media waited for him to fall flat on his face on the biggest stages, to be exposed as an overblown creation of the spotlight. Yet he not only lived up to the hype, he has exceeded it.

Those among us who were waiting for him to turn into Darius Miles would have been amazed if he ended up as good as 2003 NBA Draft classmate Carmelo Anthony, who led Syracuse to a national title in his one year of college ball. Anthony is really good. LeBron is even better. Along with perhaps only Kobe Bryant, he is the talent that could define this generation of professional basketball.

But virtually all great players have the thing LeBron doesn't have yet. They have rings. And as long as LeBron remains beneath the NBA's summit, his equation of greatness won't be total.

It is possible to not win a ring and still be viewed as great. John Stockton and Karl Malone never won an NBA title. Dan Marino never won a Super Bowl and Ted Williams never won a World Series. They're all legends in their sports. But the list of all-time greats without at least one title to their credit is short. Even then, if you think of Malone, Marino, Alex Rodriguez, what is the first thought that normally comes to mind?

"Great? sure. But they've never won the big one."

What does it all mean? As much as we want LeBron to win a title for the city of Cleveland and his hometown of Akron, as much as we want him to live up to his status of "The Chosen One" and end our nearly half-century title drought, this is as much a personal quest for LeBron as it is a quest to win a championship for the region.

As The Plain Dealer's Brian Windhorst [wrote on Sunday](#), in addition to LeBron's place in history, there are very real financial ramifications for LeBron

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No matter if he plays in Cleveland, New York, Los Angeles, Memphis or anywhere else, his jersey, and the apparel that carries his name and logo, will continue to lag in sales behind Bryant, Garnett and others who have won rings.

LeBron has stated that he wants to become a global icon. No matter how much business savvy he has, how many tips he gets from investment guru Warren Buffett, how many individual accolades he collects on the basketball court, the most important ingredient will always be that NBA world championship -- actually, multiple championships if LeBron wants to get in on the conversation for greatest player ever.

Without rings, his talent will be admired, but his image will never be totally embraced outside of Ohio.

But that could all change this year. This season could be the first season of the rest of LeBron's career. Because this is the first year of the LeBron Era that the Cavaliers have a team capable of winning an NBA title.

It would be too harsh to call the Cavs' 2007 NBA Finals appearance a fluke, but it was the product of LeBron's unreal finish to Game 5 against Detroit, Daniel Gibson's Game 6 outburst and the Pistons' regression from title contender to also-ran. It was an upset, and the Spurs proved that in no uncertain terms by demolishing the Cavs in the Finals.

This year, if the Cavs overcome Boston, Detroit, Orlando and whoever else the East throws at them, and advances to their second NBA Finals in three years, it won't be a fluke. And if it's an upset, it will be a mild one.

As it stands, this Cavs team has the talent to beat any team in the East in a playoff series, and might be able to handle the West champ in the Finals depending on the circumstances and who has homecourt

advantage. If Danny Ferry can turn Wally Szczerbiak's expiring deal into a meaningful acquisition before the trade deadline in February, the Cavs might even become title favorites.

The pieces are in place now more than they've ever been. For a player with the superlative skills of LeBron, a lack of a supporting cast is no longer a barrier to hardware. It all comes down to desire, how much effort LeBron wants to give through 82 regular season games to set up a high playoff seed and subsequent title run. If LeBron is motivated and can motivate his teammates, and if everyone stays mostly healthy, this might be the best chance Cleveland has had for a title since the Indians of the mid-'90s.

This might also be the year that LeBron turns the corner toward true greatness. The kind that is measured in gold.