

When your team is 18-3 and has its sights locked squarely on a world championship, individual records seem rather trivial. In May and hopefully June, when the Cavs are battling it out in high-stakes playoff games, attempting to end Cleveland's sports title drought at 45 years, few are going to remember a damp night in early December, when Zydrunas Ilgauskas and LeBron James each carved a notch in the Cavs record book. The ring is most definitely the thing, but as far as the plodding marathon of the NBA regular season goes, Tuesday's 114-94 win over the Raptors was pretty special.



When your team is 18-3 and has its sights locked squarely on a world championship, individual records seem rather trivial.

In May and hopefully June, when the Cavs are battling it out in high-stakes playoff games, attempting to end Cleveland's sports title drought at 45 years, few are going to remember a damp night in early December, when Zydrunas Ilgauskas and LeBron James each carved a notch in the Cavs record book.

The ring is most definitely the thing, but as far as the plodding marathon of the NBA regular season goes, Tuesday's 114-94 win over the Raptors was pretty special.

Before we even get to the accomplishments of Z and LeBron, the Cavs created some of their own NBA history, winning their ninth consecutive game by 12 or more points. No team -- not the 1996 Bulls, not the 1986 Celtics, not the 1972 Lakers -- has ever done that. They also set a franchise record by winning their fourth straight game by 20 or more points.

Naysayers will point out that the Cavs' great start has included wins over the Knicks, Bucks, Thunder and Bobcats. But in the 30-team NBA, the talent disparity between teams is relatively small, and the Cavs are still routinely treating their opponents like North Carolina treats midmajor schools on the college level.

This type of dominance doesn't typically happen in the NBA. But so far, the Cavs

have been all about making history this season.

Which brings us to Z, LeBron and the records they broke on Tuesday. Ilgauskas is now the franchise's all-time leading rebounder with 5,230. LeBron is the franchise's all-time steals leader with 737. The men they passed were not-so-arguably the two greatest players in the franchise's history prior to LeBron: Brad Daugherty and Mark Price, respectively.

LeBron and Z are two starkly different players who have taken two starkly different roads to the record books. Yet they share a bond that seems to go deeper than most NBA teammates.

Ilgauskas' road to the rebound record is one of perseverance. If you've followed the Cavs over the past 12-plus years, you know the story by now. Ilgauskas came to Cleveland in the 1996 draft, eight picks after the team selected Vitaly Potapenko out of Wright State. Ilgauskas was something of a project player, tall and gangly, but with quick feet and a soft shooting touch.

But his feet soon started betraying him. Broken bones in his feet caused him to miss his would-be rookie season of 1996-97, after missing his last professional season in Lithuania due to a broken foot. He recovered to make the All-Rookie Team in 1998, but was on the shelf again for the 1999-2000 season. He returned and helped the Cavs out of the gate to a 15-8 start in the 2000-01 season, but just before Christmas, during a game in Miami, he broke his foot again.

Bitterly discouraged, Z contemplated retirement. The following summer, the Cavs drafted seven-foot high schooler DeSagana Diop as Z's potential replacement. But Z gave it one last try, a radical restructuring of his left foot. After months of grueling rehab, Z took the floor again in December 2001.

It was a watershed moment. Z has been among the most durable centers in the league since then. Now, his aging back is of greater concern than his feet. Eight years ago, no one thought he'd reach the bad-back portion of his career, something just about every 30-something big man deals with in pro basketball.

Not only did Z return, he became a borderline-elite center, earning all-star nods in 2003 and '05, improving his shooting stroke from outside and morphing into one of the best offensive rebounders in the game. Somehow, his march to the Cavs' all-time rebounding record became a matter of "when," not

"if."

Z's early-career injuries seem to have given him perspective on what is happening now. In an ego-first era of NBA basketball, when many players with two all-star berths to their credit might have a hard time accepting a supporting cast role under LeBron, Z not only tolerates it, he enjoys it.

Z was one of the first players LeBron sought out after the 2003 draft, promising Z that he'd turn the Cavs into a winner. Even if LeBron didn't embrace the Cavs as a kid in Akron, Z's story still made an impact on him.

When the Cavs clinched their first-ever NBA Finals berth in 2007, LeBron sought out Z for an emotional bear hug. This was less than six weeks after Z and his wife lost a son and daughter, delivered stillborn.

Perhaps even more than some fans, LeBron realizes what Z has been through and what Z means to the Cavaliers organization. In the days leading up to both players' record-setting night, LeBron was attempting to deflect attention off himself and onto Ilgauskas, openly campaigning for Z's No. 11 to hang from the rafters at The Q someday.

To that, I say: As long as it's alongside No. 23 and a couple of NBA championship banners.

Appropriately, LeBron and Z each set their records in their own, in-character ways. LeBron did it with speed and flair as he picked off a pass from Jose Calderon less than a minute into Tuesday's game, sprinted down the floor, took a return pass from Delonte West and threw down a vicious dunk. No fuss, no muss, and when Mike Brown took a timeout so LeBron could feel the love from the crowd, LeBron walked to center court, raised his arms and soaked it in.

As has been the theme throughout his career, Z's record-setting moment came after a period of waiting. He quickly grabbed three boards to tie the record, then was sent to the bench as the reserves came onto the floor.

Z didn't nab his record-setting rebound until two minutes remained in the first half. In true Ilgauskas form, it wasn't pretty, but it was effective. And it came with a little help from LeBron, who was poised to snatch from Z a carom off a Jason Kapon miss. But in midair, LeBron relented, the ball bounced to the floor, Z scooped it up

and set the record.

When Z's took his curtain call, it was nowhere near center court and involved a quick wave to the crowd. It wasn't Z being standoffish, it was Z wanting to get back to the business of letting LeBron take up the spotlight.

Through all six years of the LeBron Era, the relationship between he and Ilgauskas has been the one constant on the basketball floor for the Cavs. It's a work-related friendship that doesn't get a ton of press, but it has endured. And it is a central part of what makes the Cavs work so well as a team.

Tuesday night, both players had a chance to take an individual bow for their accomplishments. But when, and if, the Cavs ever hoist the Larry O'Brien Trophy as the NBA's world champions, rest assured it will be because LeBron and Z worked together to get there.

Someday, we might be able to look up at the banners hanging from the rafters of The Q and re-live it all.