

Chemistry on a professional sports team is a delicate thing. So far, the Cavaliers have fended off any large-scale threats to their team's chemistry and remain an overall cohesive bunch that continues to win games at a thrilling pace -- 27-5 after Friday's win over the Bulls. But with an injury to big Z and the trade deadline looming, will GM Danny Ferry make a move that may make the team better on paper, but risk messing with the team chemistry? Erik Cassano talks about it in his latest.



Chemistry on a professional sports team is a delicate thing. With million-dollar salaries and million-dollar egos in every direction, the players on a team basically have to make up their minds that they are going to coexist with teammates.

Even then, as playing time is distributed and redistributed by the coaches, as players find their way onto pedestals and into doghouses, on and off the injured list, the happy little locker room is in danger of catching a stray virus that can quickly spread into rampant discord.

So far, the Cavaliers have fended off any large-scale threats to their team's chemistry and remain an overall cohesive bunch that continues to win games at a thrilling pace -- 27-5 after Friday's win over the Bulls.

But that doesn't mean that Danny Ferry can take his hand off the rudder. Choppy waters lurk ahead as the 2009 portion of the schedule toughens considerably, and Ferry will find himself forced into making some critical decisions over the next couple of months.

There are two main schools of thought on the current state of the Cavs' roster. One school says that the Cavs are still a major trade away from the ability to take on all comers and win an NBA title. The other school says the Cavs have a cohesive roster winning at a franchise-record pace, so why fix what isn't broken?

Both schools of thought have some solid reasoning behind them, which makes Ferry's decision on what to do with the expiring contracts of Wally Szczerbiak and Eric Snow all the more difficult.

The injury to Zydrunas Ilgauskas' ankle throws another wrench into the works. Z originally sprained his ankle in early December. He returned after several games, but it quickly became apparent that the ankle wasn't healing properly. A second MRI this week revealed a small bone chip in the ankle, which will sideline him for up to a month.

The extended stretch without Z will give Ferry a definite sense of how this team will operate minus one of its key players. Until further notice, Anderson Varejao will start at center, and Varejao's bench minutes will go to some combination of J.J. Hickson, Darnell Jackson and Lorenzen Wright.

It means that rookies Hickson and Jackson will continue to develop their NBA games. It also means that Mike Brown could be forced to play his rookies in critical situations where they might make rookie mistakes, commit critical turnovers and possibly cost the team a win or two.

Generally, rebuilding teams play their rookies in critical situations, not teams trying to win 60-plus games and a world championship.

Ferry cannot allow injuries or other circumstances pressure him into making a trade he wouldn't otherwise make. But he also cannot let himself become convinced that great team chemistry is a golden egg that must be protected at all costs.

Yes, roles have been defined on the Cavs roster. Yes, a team generally performs at its best when players know what is going to be asked of them, night in and night out. But if Ilgauskas' absence proves an unsealable leak and the rookies aren't ready for the training wheels to come off, Ferry's strength of position in trade negotiations will become somewhat compromised, as the prospect of adding another veteran big man will become more of a necessity than a luxury. If the loss total creeps upward in Z's absence, the red flag will morph into a warning siren.

Come playoff time, and maybe even beforehand, the Cavs will need the best possible roster Ferry can deliver. That might prove to be the roster as it currently stands. But now that the injury to Ilgauskas has become a longer-term issue, chances are the Cavs' lack of veteran frontcourt depth is about to be exposed on some level, and Ferry won't be able to plug his ears, whistle "Dixie" and hope everything falls back into place with no front office intervention.

Ferry likes the makeup of his roster. It's hard to find a ton of fault with a 27-5 team, and a lot -- both good and bad -- can happen between now and the late February trade deadline. But if Ferry shuns potential trade partners just because he's trying to preserve harmony in his locker room, he's chasing the wrong goal. It's ultimately about hardware, not harmony. Good chemistry is merely a means to an end, but it's only one of the means.

In the end, a GM has to trust that his players are big boys and can work together if they're all focused on the common goal of winning a championship. As long as Ferry isn't bringing in a player with a longstanding reputation as a troublemaker and polarizer, the burden ultimately falls on Brown and locker-room leaders like LeBron James and Mo Williams to assimilate a new teammate.

Making a move just to make a move, or as a knee-jerk panic reaction to an injury, is a bad idea for a GM. But sitting on your hands just to preserve the status quo is almost as bad. In the past year, Ferry has done a great job of picking and choosing his spots to make bold moves. It has paid off. But now that he's seeing the payoff, it's not time to develop a case of cold feet.

The Cavs roster is very good, but it can still use some shoring up if Ferry can make the right deal happen. With Z on the shelf until possibly February, Ferry might face escalated pressure from within the organization (read: Team LeBron) to seek out and make that deal.