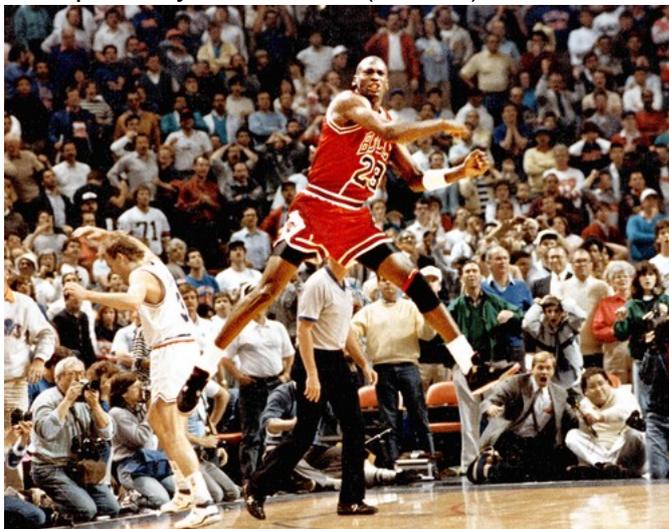


In Cleveland, we don't have to be taught how to hold our teams' rivals in seething contempt. It's a seed that sprouts in our brains sometime between birth and introduction to solid foods. We don't learn rival-hate, so much as the instinct is awakened in us. This year, the Cavs seem destined to face an old rival (Pistons or Bulls) in the first, potentially an emerging rival (Celtics) in the Eastern Finals, and possibly a new rival (Lakers) in the NBA Finals. Erik Cassano writes about it in his latest.



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At least two generations of Browns fans grew up loathing the Steelers. A new generation will be raised to hold the Ravens at very nearly the same level of contempt. Like scarlet and gray? You don't like maize and blue. The Red Sox and Yankees might have the most famous rivalry in baseball -- maybe in all of sports -- but the Indians have their separate longstanding rivalry with each. Time tells the truth, even if Boston and New York fans don't want to admit it. The Tribe's feud with baseball's titans goes back more than a century to the first years of the American League.

Then there are the Cavaliers. Professional basketball is something of a strange animal in Northeast Ohio. The Cavs have been playing basketball since 1970, plenty of time to develop heated rivalries with a number of teams, plenty of time for area fans to align themselves against those teams, year in and year out, regardless of win-loss record.

But those rivalries haven't developed, at least not to the extent of the blood rivalries that carry us through Browns, Indians and Buckeye football seasons.

There are a number of reasons why. Most glaring, for about 80 percent of their

history, the Cavs weren't good enough to develop rivalries. They didn't pose a threat to any contender, and if a contender came to town and walloped the Cavs, how was that different from any other game? Going a step further, a great number of local fans embraced Magic Johnson's Lakers, Larry Bird's Celtics and Michael Jordan's Bulls, including a certain hometown star who now wears Jordan's No. 23. Those teams won. They were exciting. They had star power. The Cavs didn't.

Of course, those frontrunning fans, showing up to The Coliseum in opposing garb, helped cause the first pangs of true rivalry bloodlust in Cavs fans in the late '80s, when the team finally emerged from the doldrums to become a legitimate threat to the Eastern Conference power teams of the era. Conveniently, those teams happened to be the Detroit Pistons and the Chicago Bulls, rivals with relatively close geographical proximity.

When the Coliseum-era Cavs of Mark Price and Brad Daugherty reached their zenith between 1989 and '92, the Pistons and Bulls ruled the league. Detroit captured NBA titles in 1989 and '90, and the Bulls ran off their first pair in 1991 and '92. The Cavs, though a quality team, remained a stepping stone. Jordan, injuries and the Ron Harper for Danny Ferry trade kept them there.

The Cavs wilted down the stretch in the '88-'89 season, losing the division to Detroit and the first round of the playoffs on Jordan's Shot. That season featured Price's infamous run-in with Rick Mahorn's elbow, leaving Price with a concussion and possibly contributing to the Cavs' late-season dropoff.

In '91-'92, arguably the most successful Cavs season prior to this season, the Cavs tied a team record with 57 wins, but still finished 10 games behind the 67-15 Bulls. They eased past the Nets in the first round, ended Larry Bird's career with a Game 7 elimination in Round 2, but fell to the Bulls in the Eastern Conference Finals. A Jordan buzzer-beater eliminated the Cavs again one year later, this time in the second round, though that shot sealed a sweep.

The seeds for two bitter rivalries had been sown, but that era of Cavs basketball ended soon thereafter. Injuries ended the careers of Daugherty and Larry Nance by 1994. Price was traded to Washington in 1995. Jordan retired to play minor league baseball, then returned stronger than ever. The Pistons drafted Grant Hill, but then adopted a curious color scheme of teal, dark red and gold, and faded into relative obscurity.

The Cavs really had no rivals until LeBron landed in their laps, and the Pistons reclaimed their red, white and blue colors and their standing as a title-winning defensive juggernaut in the mid-2000s. The teams have met twice in the playoffs, the Pistons escaping with a seven-game conference semifinals victory in 2006, and the Cavs winning their first conference title over the Pistons a year later.

The re-emergence of the Celtics has caused the simmering rivalry between LeBron and Paul Pierce to blossom into a full-fledged team rivalry, though Cleveland's dislike of the Celtics still stems more from an overall dislike of Boston sports and their mouthy fans in general. Losing to the Celtics during the title run a year ago helped fan the flames in no small part, however.

But the rivalry history of the Cavs is still somewhat muddled and incomplete. If the Pistons and Bulls, and more recently the Celtics, are the Cavs' chief rivals, there haven't been many meaningful games played between the Cavs and their rivals over the years. The Cavs are 0-5 in playoff series against the Bulls, and the '89 and '92 series were the only ones that were really competitive. The Cavs had never played the Pistons in the playoffs prior to '06. The last two Cavs-Celtics playoff series went seven games, but occurred 16 years apart.

But this year, the longest chapter in the history of Cavs' rivalries might be written in the playoffs. With the Cavs almost certain to lock up the East's 1-seed sometime between now and early next week, and the Pistons and Bulls seemingly destined to decide the seventh and eighth seeds between themselves, the Cavs will apparently face one or the other in the first round.

If it's Chicago, it need not be mentioned that these aren't the Jordan Bulls. Jordan's departure from the Bulls organization in 1998 let most of the air out of any semblance of a rivalry with Chicago. But it's still the team that dominated the Cavs in the playoffs those many years ago, and there hasn't been an opportunity for payback until now.

Making the prospect of a Bulls-Cavs first round series even sweeter is the fact that the Bulls have been declawed as a conference title threat, and would present the Cavs an opportunity for a first-round beatdown. Not that Chicago is going to suffer the slings and arrows. An 8-seed Bulls team ranks far behind the Cubs and the Jay Cutler-fortified Bears on the scale of importance to the average Chicago fan.

The Pistons would present a unique challenge to the Cavs. They're not your

typical wet-behind-the-ears 8-seed playoff team. They're certainly not the force they were even a year ago, but this is still a veteran team that has been to the conference finals in each of the past six seasons. They're still capable of playing defense at a high level, still steeled to playoff pressure and still capable of making jump shots in bunches. Detroit's playoff seeding will be artificially lowered this year by injuries and some questionable coaching and front office decisions. This is still the roster of a 4-seed or 5-seed team, and they're going to be a tough out for whoever draws them.

The Cavs should still defeat Chicago or Detroit in the first round, possibly setting up the first-ever playoff series between LeBron and Dwyane Wade, should Miami advance past their first round opponent (likely Atlanta). Knock out Wade and the Heat, and the prize would almost certainly be Pierce and the Celtics or Dwight Howard and the Magic in the conference finals. Advance to the NBA Finals, and LeBron will probably find Kobe Bryant and the Lakers waiting.

If you haven't learned to spew venom at other NBA teams the way you do the Steelers and Yankees, this might be the Spring That Launched A Thousand Rivalries.

When the opposing team takes free throws at The Q, a common Cavs practice is to flash Steelers, Michigan, Yankees and Red Sox logos on the scoreboard to get the crowd booing. This spring might represent a large step toward ensuring that, when the opposing team is lining up for a field goal attempt at a future Browns game, a Celtics or Lakers logo will flash on the Cleveland Browns Stadium scoreboard.