

For the first seven quarters of the Cavs-Pistons series, you could say one definite thing about Detroit's basketball team: In the immortal words of former Arizona Cardinals coach Dennis Green, "They are who we thought they were." Then, to start the fourth quarter of game two, Erik Cassano says that the Cavs stopped respecting the Pistons. And while Detroit likely can't win this series ... ending the game strong Tuesday night may give them the confidence to extend it.



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In the immortal words of former Arizona Cardinals coach Dennis Green, "They are who we thought they were."

For all of Game 1 and the first three quarters of Game 2, the Pistons were in a full-on Fall of Rome state. The team that was once the NBA's Marlboro men -- tough, tougher and staunchly devoted to doing things their way -- looked limp, soggy and resigned to defeat. They didn't have the strength to stop LeBron's muscle-drives inside. They didn't have the speed to stop Mo Williams and his indefatigable darting, dodging, stopping and popping.

They had less energy than Anderson Varejao, less height than Zydrunas Ilgauskas, less grit than Delonte West. They knew it. What's more, the Pistons, to a man, knew they could have avoided all of this if they had just played a little better down the stretch. If they had beaten Chicago one last time, if they hadn't slumped right after clinching a playoff spot, Detroit could have faced the

injury-ravaged Celtics, or a team they have recently owned, the Magic.

But they didn't play well enough down the stretch. They sank to the eighth seed, and drew the 66-win Cavs and all 6'-9" and 270 pounds of their superstar battering ram.

The Pistons weren't just discouraged heading into this series. They needed a sympathy card that read "Sorry it All Blew Up in Your Face. Good Luck With the Rebuild."

For seven quarters, the Cavs never stopped reminding the Pistons that the longest six inches in basketball is the distance between the rock and the hard place. Or maybe between the ground and the bottom of Cleveland's collective foot. The Cavs won Game 1 102-84 and held a 79-50 lead through three quarters of Game 2.

Perhaps what happened next was predictable, then.

We learn this type of story in our earliest days of schooling. Usually it involves a tortoise and a hare. The two animals -- one inherently fast and athletic, the other doomed to carry a shell around on its back for all its days -- line up for a foot race. The hare, of course, bursts away from the starting line with speed that the tortoise can't hope to match. Within seconds, the tortoise's view of the hare is reduced to a speck in the distance. Within minutes, the hare has completely disappeared from the tortoise's view.

The mismatch is so thorough, all the tortoise can do is keep his pace and hope that the hare either falls or does something really stupid off in that vast distance the tortoise has yet to cover.

We all remember the outcome. The hare knows his lead has become all but insurmountable, so he takes his victory for granted. He slows up. Still no tortoise. So, he figures "What the heck? I'll rest for a while. I'll still win." The hare lays down by the side of the road, eventually falls asleep, and the tortoise catches and passes the hare, winning the race.

Which begs the question, if it's one of the first cautionary tales you learn as a child, why does it keep creeping up in the adult world? Maybe it's human nature.

Blowout wins, and the spoils that come with them, have become something of a point of pride with the Cavs this year. LeBron didn't play in 14 fourth quarters during the regular season. Williams, West and Ilgauskas have also done considerable pine time while the back of the bench polished off comfy wins.

The Cavs have been masters of making garbage time arrive early this season. So when they toted very nearly a 30-point lead into the fourth quarter on Tuesday, they figured the Victory Fairy had left another quarter under their pillow.

But this was different, because this was the playoffs. No one was playing for a lottery pick. No one was stuck in the midseason doldrums of another game on another long road trip in the dead of winter. Every team good enough to enter the NBA's championship tournament is good enough to be there. Every team is playing to win. That even includes the sagging Pistons.

The Cavs, quite simply, did not respect that fact the way they should have. Not only did Mike Brown bring his starters to the bench, the starters began to power down mentally. Not only did the starters begin to power down mentally, the hybrid second-third unit that replaced them was playing with nary more than their collective mental/emotional pilot light burning.

The Pistons -- even more specifically, Will Bynum -- took advantage of the snoozing hare.

Bynum, performing an excellent impersonation of former Pistons bench scorer extraordinaire Vinnie Johnson, ignited a 27-5 Pistons run that sliced a 79-50 Cleveland lead to 84-77 with just under four minutes to play. For the first time in the series, the Pistons had some real momentum and the Cavs and their fans were sweating one out.

The Cavs failed to score a field goal for about 10 minutes of the fourth quarter,

while the Pistons' second unit struck gold. Bynum's 13 points were complimented by Aaron Afflalo's 10, and some positive contributions from the underrated Walter Herrmann that didn't show up on the stat sheet.

Meanwhile, a Cavs lineup fronted by Wally Szczerbiak, Daniel Gibson and Joe Smith stagnated at the offensive end, slowed at the defensive end and made a number of unforced errors. If it wasn't for 27 Detroit personal fouls leading to a staggering 43-16 Cavs advantage in free throw attempts, the outcome of the game could have been left very much in doubt. Teams that go on 27-5 fourth quarter runs are likely the winners in most such games. Teams that go 10 fourth-quarter minutes without a field goal are likely the losers.

Of course, without that massive free throw disparity contributing to the lopsided score through three quarters, the Cavs don't play the role of the hare in this race. LeBron and the starters stay in the game and don't try to turn the sidelines into premature party central.

But this is the burden that falls on the shoulders of a team that has been as dominant as the Cavs have this year. Teams will never underestimate the Cavs. Even the most downtrodden of clubs will start to believe that they can slay Goliath if they can find the right stone. The Cavs, on the other hand, need to check their collective ego once in a while before someone checks it for them.

That is what happened Tuesday: an ego check. The Cavs might be the preordained winners of this series, but they still have to actually win four games to advance. And there is no way the Cavs should ever assume that the Pistons, no matter how beaten down they are, will simply lay down and concede the series to Cleveland.

It's the first rule of competition in any form: respect your opponent. Respect their ability to compete. For a sizable chunk of the fourth quarter on Tuesday, the Cavs didn't do that.

Luckily, unlike in the fable, this hare woke up in time to avert a disastrous loss -- even before the outcome of the game was put into serious doubt. But the Pistons' fourth-quarter run still might have given them a toe-hold, however small, in this series as they head back home for Game 3 on Friday -- not enough to sway the series in their favor necessarily, but maybe enough to prolong it. That is not what the Cavs want or need.

If the Pistons even extend this series to six games, the Cavs will have lost a little something. A little bit of rest, a little bit of swagger, a little bit of invincibility. And it will be that much tougher to regain that aura facing the winner of the Hawks-Heat series.