

## Ten Questions: The 2009/10 Cavaliers

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}  
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It is not hyperbole to say that the upcoming Cavs season will be the most eagerly anticipated season in Cleveland sports history, at least for those of us born after the Browns' glory days. Part of that is the ugly train wreck that is non-Cavaliers Cleveland sports. The Browns continue to be a league-wide embarrassment ... and the Indians are about to put the wraps on a near 100 loss season. In contrast, the Cavs are possibly at their strongest ever. Without further ado, let's get to the ten most pressing questions as the Cavs start training camp for the 2009-10 season.



It is not hyperbole to say that the upcoming Cavs season will be the most eagerly anticipated season in Cleveland sports history, at least for those of us born after the Browns' glory days. Part of that is the ugly train wreck that is non-Cavaliers Cleveland sports. The Browns are making Cleveland fans wonder why, 14 years after the original team moved to Baltimore, the NFL still won't heed their call to put a professional football team in Cleveland.

The Indians, meanwhile, are in the last week of a season that will be better described as *euthanized* rather than *completed*.

In contrast, the Cavs are possibly at their strongest ever. Yes, they exited the playoffs prematurely last spring, but (a) that still ranks as one of the best Cleveland sports seasons ever, and (b) the Eastern Conference landscape has changed since then.

Without further ado, let's get to the ten most pressing questions as the Cavs start training camp for the 2009-10 season:

### 1. Can LeBron and Shaq coexist?

This issue is far and away the number one concern for the Cavs as training camp starts. Can Bron and The Big Shaquisition play together effectively? We know what the Cavs will get from LeBron.

We also know pretty much what the Cavs will get from O'Neal - he may be on the back nine of his career, but his downward slide is still a lot higher than the peaks of most other players' careers.

The question is: can they both perform on the same court, for the same team, at the same time? Having Shaq on the floor is new ground for LeBron - he has never played with such a dominating low-post presence before.

Aside from the Olympics, LeBron has also never played with a teammate with such a high level of star power and the ego to match it.

To be fair, Shaq appears to know that the Cavs are LeBron's team, and he's just playing on it. Cavs fans can also take comfort from Shaq having been down this road before. He willingly played second banana to Dwyane Wade during the Heat's championship season in 2006. So the precedent is there to expect James and O'Neal to be happy together.

But if January rolls around, and either or both of them are sniping to the press about their superstar teammate, then look out below.

### 2. Can LeBron and his contract situation coexist?

Did you know that James will be a free agent after this season? If not, then you have missed the 28,753,118 articles (approximately all but ten of them from either ESPN or Yahoo's Adrian Wojnarowski) on the subject.

From his own personal perspective, LeBron is very smart to hold off on signing an extension with the Cavs, as [I wrote](#) earlier this summer. What's good for LeBron, however, may not be what's good for the team.

Every day, LeBron will be asked about his future plans.

Every day, LeBron's teammates will be asked about LeBron's future plans.

The issue could become a huge distraction.

Should the Cavs hit any losing streaks (which they fortunately avoided last season), the drumbeat for LeBron to leave Cleveland will only grow louder.

That is not what the Cavs need as they embark on a season with legitimate championship aspirations.

### **3. What is Delonte West's future with this team, and will his pending legal situation hang like a cloud over him and affect his performance? □**

As I have said before: if LeBron James is the face of the Cleveland Cavaliers, then Delonte West is its heart. He is the ultimate "glue" guy - an unselfish player who can score double-digit points per game, defend opposing guards, and generally do whatever it takes to win -- and he does it all without a hint of ego.

However, his arrest in Maryland two weeks ago raises renewed questions as to his stability. As [reported](#) by the Plain Dealer's Brian Windhorst, the Cavs gave West a wide berth this season - looking the other way when he showed up just an hour before tip-off of a playoff game, for instance. Cruising on the highways on a bike,

armed with a shotgun and two other guns, works well if you are [protecting John Connor](#)

Otherwise, you have to find several poles to accommodate all the red flags.

Based on past history, Delonte can expect to be suspended for a few games at some point this season. It's the other 75 or so games that are the issue. Can Delonte put aside his issues and just get back to playing basketball?

If not, the Cavs' guard rotation suddenly becomes a lot thinner.

#### **4. Can Anthony Parker and Jamarion Moon provide the swingman help this team needs, as evidenced by the Orlando series?**

If last year's Cavs team had an Achilles heel, it was the lack of size on the perimeter. Sure, James is a dominant presence, but most of the remaining members of the Cavs' guard/small forward rotation (West, Mo Williams, and Daniel Gibson) were undersized. The Cavs did have some size in Wally Szczerbiak and Sasha Pavlovic.

Alas, Wally was too slow to cover a drifting continent, and Pavlovic's career went into a tailspin after a death in his family (his skill).

The lack of perimeter size was exploited by Orlando in the Eastern Conference Finals, and was the exact reason why the Cavs got an unexpected early vacation.

To address those issues, the Cavs signed two free agents, Anthony Parker (formerly of Toronto) and Jamarion Moon (who last played for Miami). Both Parker and Moon bring size to the shooting guard/small forward positions.

Neither player is a star, but both are being counted on to be upgrades from Szczerbiak and Pavlovic.

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If they provide some scoring punch and hound opponents on defense, the Cavs will have the deepest one-through-nine rotation in the league.

If they don't ... look for other teams with size on the perimeter to continue exploiting the Cavs.

### 5. Will the loss of John Kuester (to Detroit) put this team's offense back into neutral?

The one consistent criticism of Coach Mike Brown during his tenure in Cleveland has been his lack of imagination on offense. Way too often in prior seasons, the Cavs used one offensive set, that being LeBron And Four Guys Waiting For A Bus. While LAFGW FAB (that acronym just rolls right off the tongue, no?) is sometimes necessary - there are moments when a superstar has to become selfish - it's not so great as a consistent offensive strategy.

That changed last year. Under the direction of assistant coach John Kuester, the Cavs displayed much more creativity on offense. Alas, Kuester has left the Cavs to become Detroit's newest head coach.

The question becomes:

will the Cavs' offense regress now that they do not have Kuester as their mastermind?

Will there be far too much standing around on offense, as was the case in prior years?

### 6. Will J.J. Hickson take a step forward this year?

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Hickson, the Cavs' first round pick last year, showed some flashes of ability before he was sidelined with a back injury. Unfortunately, that back injury lingered throughout much of the offseason, costing him valuable training and development time. Fortunately, it now appears that Hickson is back to health, and that his physical problems are hopefully behind him.

Hickson figures to fight with Darnell Jackson for minutes at the backup power forward position. His ceiling is definitely higher than Jackson's, but he may not be as good of a player presently. That being said, the Cavs figure to win a lot of their games in blowouts this season, and there should be plenty of garbage time minutes so that Hickson can get ever more game experience.

If he shows a marked jump from his rookie year to his sophomore season, Hickson could become part of the rotation by playoff time.

The opportunity is there - the question is, can Hickson seize it?

### **7. How has the Eastern Conference landscape changed since the end of the 2008-09 season?**

The Cavs had two legitimate opponents in the Eastern Conference last season: Boston and Orlando.

The Cavs struggled during their regular-season meetings against the Celtics.

As for the Magic ... we all know how that turned out.

If ever a team were built to be the kryptonite to the Cavs' Superman, the 2008-09 Orlando Magic was it. In Hedo Turkoglu, they had the second-best "point forward" in the game. In Rashard Lewis, Mickael

Pietrus, and Courtney Lee, they had other tall perimeter players who gave opposing defenders fits.

And

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in Dwight Howard, they had perhaps the best interior player in the game today.

Those Magic don't live here anymore. Turkoglu is now a Toronto Raptor, and Lee (along with valuable backup point guard Rafer Alston) are now New Jersey Nets.

In their place, the Magic now have Vince Carter.

&quot;Vinsanity&quot; is still one of the game's more prolific scorers.

However, he will not replace Turkoglu as the initiator of the offense and a matchup nightmare.

Orlando could well take a step back this season, simply because their new players, when added to their existing roster, don't quite equal the sum of their parts.

The Celtics, meanwhile, are watching their window of opportunity shut. When Celtics GM Danny Ainge traded for Kevin Garnett and Ray Allen before the start of the 2007-08 season, he knew that they were &quot;win now&quot; moves, designed to give the team a two to three-year window of opportunity.

That window is closing, and it will slam shut if Garnett cannot recover from the severe (and largely silent) knee ailment that caused him to miss the entire playoffs.

It's very possible that the Cavs' stiffest challenge this season will not come from either the Magic or Celtics, but instead from a rising young team like the Hawks. That being said, they are still both dangerous teams, and particularly in Orlando's case, they'll be dangerous in different ways this coming season.

**8. Will Daniel Gibson be healthy and finally find his game after a couple of tough seasons?**

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When asked to think about Gibson, most Cavs fans' minds will flash back to the 2007 playoffs, when he buried Detroit with a volley of three-pointers. Unfortunately, that guy has not been around as much the past two seasons.

Gibson has fought injuries (last year, a badly injured toe hobbled him for most of the season) and ineffectiveness (attempts to turn him into a backup point guard have been futile, mostly because Gibson simply does not have the handles an NBA point guard needs to have).

If Gibson can return to being a sniper from three-point range, he'll have a role on this team. Thanks to Shaq, the Cavs should see more open outside looks than ever before. Gibson needs to hit those shots at a near-league-leading pace in order to have any value to this team. If he does not shoot well, he does not bring enough additional benefits to make him a rotation player on a top-tier squad.

### **9. Will Leon Powe provide a boost once his knee is completely healed (hopefully) somewhere around midseason?**

Powe, a valuable reserve for Boston the past couple of seasons, was unceremoniously dropped by the Celtics after he suffered a major knee injury that threatened most of the 2009-10 season. Seeing an opportunity, the Cavs swooped in and signed Powe to a veteran minimum contract with an option for a second year.

Acquiring Powe was a true low-risk, high-reward move by Cavs GM Danny Ferry.

If Powe can return from his knee injury (the latest estimates have that occurring sometime in the second half of the regular season) and be the valuable role player that he was in Boston, it's a brilliant move.

If Powe cannot recover ... all it costs is a little bit of Dan Gilbert's money.

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The best way to view Powe is as a deadline-deal pickup. He will probably be back to action around the trade deadline in February.

If he works out, the Cavs become that much stronger of a team.

If he doesn't, it is not as though Cleveland is counting on him.

Any production he provides is one hundred percent bonus.

And the final question, and in many ways the most important one to a fan base that is starved for wins, is:

**10. Can the season start today? Please? Pretty please?**