

It was an active and high profile off-season for the Cavaliers. GM Danny Ferry went out and traded for Shaquille O'Neal. He signed free agents Anthony Parker and Jamarion Moon. But something else happened over the summer, away from the rolling cameras. It involves LeBron, J.J. Hickson and a mentoring relationship that goes a lot deeper than most. LeBron took a personal interest in the Cavs' second-year power forward. And in Erik Cassano's latest column, he says that Hickson has suddenly become a key player who could help determine the future plans of both LeBron and the Cavs.



The Cavaliers were lauded for their team chemistry all last season. They played as one, stood as one, cheered as one, won as one. They did it for 82 regular season games and two playoff sweeps.

So what if the Cavs roster lacked the top to bottom talent of the Magic, Lakers and Celtics? The 2008-09 Cavs were a shining examples of a team as greater than the sum of its parts. It wasn't about LeBron James finding his Scottie Pippen or his Shaquille O'Neal. It was about team. All for one, one for all, as the Cavs' marketers will tell you.

We believed it, right up until the Magic ended the innocence in six games of the Eastern Conference Finals. The teamwork withered against Orlando's vexing matchup challenges. LeBron turned himself into a one-man scoring show and killed the offense in the process. His teammates couldn't hit shots. Mike Brown's coaching was woefully inadequate.

The disappointing loss scrawled over the poetry of last season, and got people both inside and outside the organization thinking about basketball, once again, as more of a science than an art.

Danny Ferry went out and got what he hopes is a reasonable facsimile of Shaq in 37-year-old, past-his-prime Shaq. You might have to sit him sometimes, just to save some tread on his tires, but if last week's road wins at Orlando and Miami are any indication, he still has enough strength and savvy to help a team win when it counts the most.

Ferry's stabs at adding height to the perimeter have panned out reasonably well so far. Anthony Parker has found a home as the starting shooting guard. Jamarion Moon's productivity has escalated over the past couple of weeks.

But something else happened over the summer, away from the rolling cameras. It involves LeBron, J.J. Hickson and a mentoring relationship that goes a lot deeper than most.

Over the summer, LeBron took a personal interest in the Cavs' second-year power forward. As a 20-year-old, Hickson had a difficult rookie season in the NBA. He averaged 4 points and 2.7 rebounds in 62 games before a back injury ended his season early. He often looked overwhelmed at the professional level after spending just one season at North Carolina State. Hickson showed flashes of his raw talent, but was frequently a defensive liability, and Brown yanked him from games early and often.

A youngster buried on a team of established veterans, a team with championship aspirations that couldn't afford to let him play through his growing pains, Hickson appeared destined to join Shannon Brown and Luke Jackson among the host of recent Cavs first-round draft busts.

But circumstances aligned differently for Hickson, who might stand to become the Cav who benefits the most from the team's unceremonious playoff ouster last spring.

For LeBron's entire NBA career, the Cavs have tried to pair him with a frontline second scorer -- his own Scottie Pippen, if you will. While it's folly to think that just because the sidekick formula worked for Michael Jordan, it is a necessary ingredient for every superstar-led championship team, there is logic in the idea

that a superstar would want a legitimate second scorer alongside him, someone else that the opposing defense has to worry about stopping each night.

The attempts date back to Ricky Davis in LeBron's rookie season. That didn't work so well. The Larry Hughes experiment could have gone better. When Mo Williams arrived, it was the closest thing to a Jordan/Pippen, Magic Johnson/James Worthy two-man setup we had seen during the LeBron Era.

But against Orlando, Mo regressed into a spot-up jump shooter, which choked off his dribble-driving, pesky-energy game. He looked like anything but a Pippen figure against the Magic.

When LeBron shuffled into the offseason, he was once again a king without an attendant. Maybe that's why he didn't just take Hickson under his wing this summer. He virtually turned him into a blood relative.

If no one else was going to provide him with a Pippen, LeBron was going to build his own Pippen. Hickson is the subject of his grand experiment. Talented enough to be a legitimate second option scorer, young enough to be molded.

True to his best-at-everything approach to life, LeBron didn't cut any corners. Hickson jetted around the country with LeBron, working out with him, appearing at basketball camps, eating meals and spending leisure time with LeBron.

In one summer, LeBron gave Hickson a thorough grounding in NBA basketball -- how to play it, how to live it, how to operate as part of a team.

Now that the season has started, LeBron has begun to test-drive his new creation. He has frequently taken a backseat at the basket, preferring to set up Hickson for his shots. Mo and Shaq -- likely at the urging of LeBron -- have done the same.

It was ultimately Brown's decision to move Hickson into the starting lineup the weekend before last, but it wouldn't shock me if behind-the-scenes campaigning from LeBron had something to do with the change. It was likely a move born from Hickson's marked progress in practice, plus Brown's willingness to trust that his superstar will do what it takes to make the lineup change work.

So far, the change has been [an amazing success](#) . The increased playing time has worked wonders for Hickson, who in his first five starts vaulted from six points

in 13 minutes against the Knicks a week ago Friday to 21 points in 34 minutes in Tuesday's win over the Warriors. The 21 points was a career high, and his second straight 20-point game, along with last Saturday's win over Utah. In that game, he scored on drives and jump shots, and -- as The Plain Dealer's Brian Windhorst [pointed out in his game notes](#)

-- was on the floor for the final play of a close game. That was a major vote of confidence from Brown. It means that Hickson is now truly being treated as a starter.

Five games is a very small sample size, and he's still making plenty of sloppy mistakes, such as losing his handle on the ball and failing to cleanly handle passes. But for the first time in his young career, it seems like Hickson's deep reservoir of raw talent has been tapped.

If Hickson demonstrates continued progress over the remainder of the season, the Cavs have just found a starting forward for years to come. A starting forward who can probably average 16 to 20 points per game, and with some more fundamental work on defense, can easily average seven to eight rebounds per game.

All of which begs the question, if LeBron is putting this much time and effort into turning Hickson into an integral part of the Cavs' future plans, why would he ditch Hickson at the end of the season to go elsewhere? LeBron isn't trying to do the Cavs a favor by grooming his replacement. The world of professional sports doesn't work like that. He's not developing a close relationship with Hickson just to be nice. He can be friends with Hickson and show him the ropes without turning him into a personal protege.

It seemingly wouldn't make a lot of sense for LeBron to go to these lengths to groom Hickson if he didn't intend to stick around and reap the benefits.

Of course, there is a lot of basketball left to be played between now and next summer. Time will tell how much the lessons of LeBron impact Hickson. Time will tell if Hickson does, in fact, develop into LeBron's second-option, Scottie Pippen sidekick figure.

But if he does, you'd have to believe that LeBron would have a hard time justifying leaving the known for the unknown of the struggling Knicks or Nets, or a potentially-complicated and delicate balancing act with Dwyane Wade on an

otherwise-threadbare roster in Miami -- and taking an upfront pay cut from what the Cavs can offer to do so.

There are seven and a half months for all that to shake out. But it appears that J.J. Hickson has suddenly -- or maybe not-so-suddenly -- become a key player who could help determine the future plans of both LeBron and the Cavs.