

Over the span of an 82-game NBA regular season, the statements made in December and January are generally lost by the time the winter ice thaws. By the time warm weather arrives and the league's playoff brackets have been pared down to a final four, the battles of wintertime are pages in dusty, seldom-opened history books. With that in mind, what the Cavs did to the Lakers in two regular season meetings this year could have little to no bearing on what might happen should the teams, who lead their respective conferences, meet again in the NBA Finals. And yet, it's hard to deny that something happened in these two games, spaced a little under a month apart.



Over the span of an 82-game NBA regular season, the statements made in December and January are generally lost by the time the winter ice thaws.

By the time warm weather arrives and the league's playoff brackets have been pared down to a final four, the battles of wintertime are pages in dusty, seldom-opened history books.

With that in mind, what the Cavs did to the Lakers in two regular season meetings this year could have little to no bearing on what might happen should the teams, who lead their respective conferences, meet again in the NBA Finals.

And yet, it's hard to deny that something happened in these two games, spaced a little under a month apart.

Cleveland won both games, 102-87 on Christmas Day in Los Angeles and 93-87 at The Q this past week. It's a feel-good story for the Cavs. They lost both matchups against the Lakers a year ago, and there is reason to believe that, had they made it past Orlando in the Eastern Conference finals, the undersized Cavs would have been overmatched by the long, limber and skilled frontcourt of the

Lakers.

This year, a physically bigger and noticeably more determined Cavs team overpowered the Lakers for about six of a possible eight quarters of basketball.

But the Cavs beat the Spurs twice in the 2006-07 season. It didn't prevent a dominating sweep at the hands of San Antonio in the '07 Finals. So why should we look upon these two wins as anything more than a couple of regular season wins that allow Cleveland fans to puff out their normally-sunken chests a little more than usual?

Because it is entirely possible that the Cavs are to the Lakers what the Lakers were to the Cavs last year -- the worst kind of matchup. And it's entirely possible that fact is not lost on the Lakers.

For all of their versatility and talent, the Lakers do have a potentially-fatal flaw that can be exploited by the right kind of team. The Lakers can be out-muscled, physically overpowered. And when that happens, they tend to go numb. Instead of battling harder, they become frustrated.

Basketball pundits -- certainly those from the L.A. area -- chalked the Christmas shellacking handed out by the Cavs to a hungry challenger facing a reigning champion that didn't take the game as seriously as it should have.

There is an element of truth to that. The Lakers were sitting pretty. The Cavs were trying to avenge last year's embarrassment. Sometimes, you just can't manufacture enough motivation. The Cavs kept momentum on their side by winning hustle play after hustle play. And then -- at least in the minds of the L.A. crowd -- the refs starting jobbing the Lakers, which led to a shower of foam fingers from the stands as the fans in attendance made complete jackasses of themselves.

It was an ugly loss for the Lakers. And what do you do with an ugly loss in the middle of the season? You learn your lessons, wash your hands of it and move on.

A successful veteran team like the Lakers, the defending world champs and two-time defending Western Conference champs, would almost certainly use a loss like that to jolt themselves awake, make the necessary tactical and

mental-preparation adjustments, and be ready for the rematch with the Cavs four weeks later.

At the outset of the rematch, the Lakers did look a lot more prepared mentally. They raced out to a 9-0 lead and stretched the lead out to as many as 11 in the first half. The Cavs made their runs, but the Lakers kept out-maneuvering Cleveland, getting buckets when they needed them and maintaining their lead into the third quarter.

But then, that "something" from up-column happened. Something clicked into place. No one knows exactly when it happened, but the Cavs started to impose their will on the game. With Mo Williams on the sideline with a sprained shoulder, with tall, athletic swingman Jamarion Moon also injured, with Delonte West giving the Cavs virtually nothing thanks to suffocating defense from Kobe Bryant, the Cavs still managed to dictate the game to the Lakers as the second half wore on.

The Cavs took their first lead at 60-59 in the third quarter, and the Lakers started to submit to what the Cavs were throwing at them. Specifically, a relentless physical assault in the paint and a whole lot of LeBron.

The Lakers didn't try to fight back with muscle. They hit some three-pointers that kept a win within grasp, but they really didn't have an answer -- or try to find an answer -- for Cleveland's power game.

Perhaps the most encouraging sign for the Cavs is that they won at a playoff pace. In the fourth quarter, the game slowed into a deliberately-paced cross between a chess match and Greco-Roman wrestling. Both teams tried to control the ball and use the shot clock. It wasn't pretty. But it was intense.

If you took the second game between the Cavs and Lakers and dropped it into the middle of June, it would find itself right at home. Or at least the Cavs would. The Lakers, they might need to do some remodeling.

After the game, both Bryant and Phil Jackson addressed the Lakers' lack of physical presence, specifically pointing the finger at Pau Gasol. The skilled seven-footer is supposed to serve as the most vexing interior matchup problem any team has to face when game-planning for the Lakers.

Gasol ended up with 13 points on 5-of-14 shooting. That's following his 11-point, 4-of-10 effort on Christmas Day.

As much as Shaq was never designed to defend the pick and roll, Gasol was never designed to play mosh-pit basketball. His greatest strength lies in his post moves around the hoop, not in his ability to muscle the ball onto the rim. He can go around and over, but seldom through, his defender. When he's being guarded by the human wall that is Shaq, the mismatches are evident.

The Cavs won the rematch by winning the game in the paint. With Leon Powe slated to come back after the all star break, and the door open for Danny Ferry to acquire another forward before the Feb. 18 trade deadline, the Cavs' grip on interior basketball could strengthen as the playoffs approach.

As for the Lakers, everything is relative. In the Western Conference, they are the bullies on the block. Surrounded by mostly finesse teams, they have unparalleled size and strength in being able to trot out Gasol, Andrew Bynum, Lamar Odom and Ron Artest. The vast majority of teams in the league don't have an answer for that challenge. Last year, the Cavs were among that vast majority.

This year, armed with Shaq, Zydrunas Ilgauskas, an improved Anderson Varejao and the potential future contributions of Powe, the Cavs are one of the few teams that can give the Lakers fits.

It's not a guarantee of beating the Lakers four times in seven, if that's the matchup come June. But the Lakers have now seen the new-look Cavs -- bigger, stronger, tougher -- and they don't like it one bit, whether they admit to it or not.

That, in and of itself, is something to file away for later in the year.