



If you've gotten through the last three Cavaliers game without suffering a complete loss of composure, I applaud you.

The Cavs' first three-game losing streak since early 2008 was everything that we fear about the future of the season, wrapped up in one neat, four-day package. Three losses against playoff teams --- two against title contenders -- in which you had to wonder, even for a split second, if it had been wise move to send Zydrunas Ilgauskas away for Antawn Jamison in the middle of the season. The last three games looked, in part, like the product of messing with a good thing.

The streak consisted of losses against Denver, Charlotte and Orlando -- three teams the Cavs could face in the postseason. They're virtually guaranteed of facing at least one. The Nuggets' overtime win at The Q was the Cavs' first home loss since just after the new year, and completely a season sweep of the Cavs. Friday, the Bobcats handled the Cavs for a third straight game. They're undefeated against Cleveland since acquiring Stephen Jackson earlier this season.

Sunday, it was deja vu in Orlando. In a re-enactment of last season's Eastern Conference Finals, the Magic won all the fourth-quarter battles, Dwight Howard put all of the Cavs' big men in foul trouble, Mo Williams played terribly and the Cavs lost in central Florida yet again.

So what gives? Why does the pre-all star break juggernaut suddenly look overrated, overinflated and ripe for the taking post-all star break?

As is usually the case when things go awry, it's an onion, and we have to peel back the layers.

1. The trade did mess things up, at least short-term

Whether or not you want to believe that a cloud of bad karma now hangs over the Cavs organization for ending a 14-year relationship with Z, the fact remains that the trade removed a rotation player and replaced him with another rotation player in Jamison, who will likely be starting at some point this week.

Though Jamison brings an inside-outside game to the power forward spot -- something that could be very useful come playoff time -- to get him, the Cavs had to disrupt the delicate balance at the center spot. Shaq and Z worked as a tandem because they took some of the load off of each other's aging legs. With Z gone, Anderson Varejao becomes the full-time backup center. His offensive game most closely resembles that of a center, but his defensive game is more of a power forward's, as he flies around the wings and paint bothering whoever has the ball. He's not always going to stay in the post and defend the rim, in other words.

As the center spot thins out, the power forward spot is about to become very crowded as Leon Powe gets set to return, maybe as early as this week. Jamison, Powe and J.J. Hickson can only play the four-spot in most lineups. Jamison is going to get his minutes, which means Mike Brown has some potentially difficult decisions to make dividing up the remainder of the minutes.

Stepping off the court, the locker room needs time to adjust as well. Though Z and Jamison are both team-first players, the Cavs still lost a locker room mainstay and have replaced him with a guy who is trying to learn the ins and outs of the Cavs' team culture. Every team is a little different, and Jamison is trying to get used to sharing the locker room with dominant personalities like LeBron and Shaq, Delonte West's quirky sense of humor, and so forth.

Ironically, in the extremely short term, Amar'e Stoudemire might have made an easier transition than Jamison. Stoudemire is a freelancer. He takes the ball and scores in isolation. There isn't a lot to negotiate there as long as Stoudemire is allowed to get the ball where he wants it. Jamison, on the other hand, because he's a team-oriented player with a broader skill set, has a lot more adjusting to do when he arrives on a new team.

2. A slump was bound to happen sooner or later

If a winning streak goes on long enough, a team is going to grow a little complacent. It's human nature. If you're not challenged for a while, you tend to go on auto pilot.

The Cavs tied a team record with 13 straight wins heading into the all-star break. You can't entirely accuse them of zoning out, because they did have emotional wins over the Lakers and Magic in that stretch. But after watching the Cavs extensively over the past two years, I've noticed that the longer the Cavs go without a gut-check moment, the harder it's going to hit them when it does come.

Last season, the Cavs went 8-0 through the first two rounds of the playoffs. They won each game against Detroit and Atlanta by double digits. They made it look really, really easy. Too easy.

Then came their second nine-day layoff of the postseason, as they waited while the Celtics and

Magic went seven games in the other conference semifinal series. Then came the deflating Game 1 loss against Orlando. The Cavs were reeling and searching for answers from that point forward.

The same thing kind of happened over the past week. A long layoff, plus a major trade, plus a deflating loss to Denver coming off of the all-star break. But at least it's still February and the Cavs still have a sizable lead in the conference. If your gut check comes with 25 games to play in the regular season, you still have time to get back to the drawing board and figure things out. If the gut check comes in late May, you're in trouble.

3. They need practice time

Monday is the first time since the Jamison deal that the Cavs could get into Cleveland Clinic Courts and have a nice, long practice. Long, full-speed practices are where the major sanding and polishing happens. It's where players get to know each other's games and coaches define roles. Then you can bond at the whirlpool/ice tubs afterward.

With a inconveniently-timed road trip that began 24 hours after the all-star break, the Cavs have been surviving on light practice and shootarounds since the trade. Shootarounds are maintenance. Full-speed practices are constructive and cathartic after a rough stretch.

4. Admittedly, the Cavs have simply played some tough teams

The Cavs might have been on a three-game losing streak even without the disruption of the all-star break or the trade.

Denver, Charlotte and Orlando are all tough tests for the Cavs. The Nuggets have two killer scorers in Carmelo Anthony and Chauncey Billups, enough size to bang with the Cavs down low and some good shooters on the wings.

The Bobcats are a riddle. They have some size and athleticism, but they don't possess any vexing matchup problems for a team like Cleveland. It doesn't really seem like they should give the Cavs so many problems, but Jackson, Gerald Wallace and Ray Felton seem to feast every time they see wine and gold.

The Bobcats do have some advantages against Cleveland: Jackson is one of the few players in the league capable of checking LeBron (maybe the best LBJ defender in the league at this point) and with new acquisitions Theo Ratliff and Tyrus Thomas added to a big man corps that already included Nazr Mohammed and Tyson Chandler, the Bobcats can defend Shaq with volume if not skill.

But when it comes down to watching Charlotte push themselves over the top thanks to the shooting of Felton and D.J. Augustin, it's mind-numbingly frustrating.

Orlando is a known quantity. As much as ESPN's John Hollinger [might like to debate](#) over whether anything has really changed between the Cavs and Magic from last year to this year,

we still generally know where things stand.

Shaq will always play Howard tough as long as his body allows. Jamison has an extensive history of playing well against the Magic, and playing good defense on Rashard Lewis. Switches won't find Delonte on Hedo Turkoglu anymore. Vince Carter still has a career's worth of evidence that says he will seldom outplay LeBron James in the fourth quarter of a head-to-head matchup -- as happened on Sunday.

It would be wise to assume that Mo will continue to not play well against Orlando, for whatever reason. His shots just don't seem to fall when he sees the Magic. Which makes Jamison's ability to replace Mo's usual 17 to 18 points per game all the more important.

That is perhaps the most compelling argument in favor of the Jamison trade, even if it means struggling in the short term.