



It's been long enough that we've forgotten what a later-round NBA playoff series is supposed to be about.

When is the last time a Cavs playoff series has taken us on an emotional roller coaster like this? The Celtics series two years ago? The Eastern Conference Finals against Detroit in 2007?

Last year, the Cavs crumpled up the Pistons and Hawks and threw them in the wastebasket. Then they fought uphill all the way against Orlando. They looked invincible for eight games and utterly mortal for six.

But within a series, we haven't experienced this kind of violent oscillation between elation, despair and elation for at least a couple of springs. A second-half comeback in Game 1, on the receiving end of a beatdown at home in Game 2 and dishing out a beatdown on the road in Game 3.

The net result is still positive, however. The Cavs lead the Celtics two games to one and have wrestled back the homecourt advantage they lost in Game 2. Regardless of the outcome of Sunday's Game 4, the Cavs won't come home in a desperate situation. Tuesday's Game 5 is either a pivotal game or a closeout game.

Saturday's off day was a chance to drink in everything that has happened to this point.

What have we learned about the Cavs? More importantly, what have we learned about LeBron James?

LeBron is a complicated superstar. In any given game, the Cavs are a mirror reflection of LeBron's competitive state of mind, so by extension the Cavs are a complicated team. A very good team, but complicated all the same.

LeBron wants to write his name alongside those of Michael Jordan, Larry Bird and Kobe Bryant. But LeBron really isn't like those guys. His personality isn't the same. How he approaches challenges isn't the same. The place where he stokes his competitive fire isn't the same.

His desire to dominate and win can burn as bright as any that has burned inside an NBA superstar. But unlike the internal conflagrations of Jordan, Bryant and Bird, who are generally regarded as the three of the most cutthroat competitors to ever play basketball, LeBron's fire inside doesn't start on the inside.

LeBron doesn't have a gland from which acid wells and rage radiates. He doesn't have a gland that automatically makes his blood run reptilian cold at the fourth-quarter, Game 7 hour of reckoning.

He is, by most accounts, a pretty nice guy. His default setting is to shake hands and hug opponents before the game. He's tried to rein that in a bit over time. Even so, it's fine to be diplomatic, even friendly, no matter if it chafes those of us in the armchair quarterback brigade who are waiting on the Jordanification of LeBron. Because that's a transformation that will never come without a brain transplant.

LeBron needs outside adversity to trigger his seek-and-destroy response. He has to endure embarrassments like the Game 2 debacle. He has to sit back and stew over it for a couple of days, listen to the doubters, listen to those who would say that LeBron has finally met his personal kryptonite, and it's an elbow boo-boo.

What he can't manufacture from within, at least to the level of a Jordan or Bryant, he can distill from the words of the detractors who are getting set to carve his team's epitaph in solid granite, two games into a series.

Three days of criticism and preparation later, the Celtics got a fully-fuming LeBron who, for the first time all series, relentlessly attacked the basket, forcing Boston's frontcourt into head-on collisions and fouls. When the Celtics tried to pack the paint, LeBron shot over them. His teammates fed off the energy, as Antawn Jamison and Delonte West had solid games, and Shaq finally looked serviceable.

The elbow? It didn't stop LeBron from 38 points, eight rebounds and seven assists. Which could lead many of us to believe that the tentative play from Games 1 and 2 was more the result of not getting mad enough, as opposed to an effort to protect his sore wing.

This momentum pendulum will continue to swing back and forth. Boston is now the team that is stewing. They will make adjustments for Game 4, and if LeBron and his teammates aren't ready to respond, the Celtics will likely tie the series. If the Cavs are able to keep attacking, they could build a nearly-insurmountable 3-1 series lead, and Game 5 could be the gateway to a third

conference finals appearance in four years.

It will hinge on LeBron and how vicious he wants to be, which will likely be the direct result of how much he is provoked. Hopefully it won't take repeated embarrassing losses to keep LeBron's internal fire stoked at a championship temperature.