



It's been nearly two weeks since the Cavs slammed the door on our fingers with a head-smacking second round exit at the hands of the Celtics. It's enough time to do some digesting of the situation.

Much has been, and will be, made of what happened in the Cavs six-game ouster, their wet-rag performances in the four losses. Was it LeBron's damaged elbow? LeBron's damaged ego? Mike Brown's inability to coach effectively during games? A player revolt against Brown's failure to adequately settle on rotations? Or were they simply an underperforming team that ran into a red-hot Boston team?

All fair questions. But you're not going to find any mining for answers in this space. The reason is simple: that doesn't matter. What happened against Boston is yesterday's news. The point is, the Celtics won the series, the Cavs' season ended, and now it's time to pick up the pieces.

What is abundantly apparent is that the Cavs of next season will, in all likelihood, look far different. Right now, there is a tug of war going on within the Cavs' ranks over the future of Brown and his staff. It's hard to imagine that Brown will retain his job after back-to-back 60-win seasons with not even a Finals appearance to show for it. But then again, Browns coach Eric Mangini looked as good as fired early last December, so stranger non-firings have happened.

Danny Ferry's contract is running out. If Dan Gilbert doesn't retain him, or Ferry elects to pursue other avenues, the Cavs will have no head of basketball operations until they hire someone else.

Then there is the LeBron soap opera. He'll be a free agent on July 1, and a few teams -- Cavs included -- might be kicking around the idea of signing him. In case you hadn't heard.

And even if LeBron, Brown and Ferry all return next season, there is simply no way the Cavs can endure the playoff humiliation they just endured without some organizational scarring. It's safe to assume the "team of destiny" mindset and can-do attitude that permeated the organization over the past two seasons will be severely withered, if not entirely dead. Even with mostly the same team returning next year, any optimism will likely be diluted with caution, or even outright cynicism. Even if the players and coaches try to fight it, it's going to be impossible to escape the widespread criticism from the fans and media.

For certain, no one who follows the NBA will be predicting the Cavs to even sniff the Finals in the spring of '11, LeBron or no LeBron. They now have a richly-deserved reputation as a regular-season dynamo that can't win in the playoffs. The Dallas Mavericks of the East.

If LeBron does re-sign with the Cavs, it's possible that the honeymoon between he and his home region fans will have ended. He simply withdrew from serious competition for the balance of three games against Boston, all blowout losses. His reputation took a major hit in Cleveland and throughout Northeast Ohio.

If LeBron does re-sign, we'll still appreciate him and we'll still cheer for him, but the elephant is now in the room. He quit on us during a time when he had everything to play for. No matter what he does in the regular season, the footnote at the bottom of the page will say "He'll just choke in the playoffs again." It will be that way until he wins a title.

And that's if he comes back. If he signs elsewhere, he'll be reviled every bit as much as Art Modell. This is the new reality for the Cleveland Cavaliers.

So where do they go from here? The Cavs need more than sanding and polishing. It's not just about acquiring guys to match up with Dwight Howard or Rashard Lewis anymore. The Cavs, as an organization, have some questions to answer about who they are and what they want to be moving forward. If I was a basketball doctor, this is the prescription I'd write. It's not a cure-all, but it might get this team on a 12-step plan to recovery. **Mik**
e Brown does need to go.

Say what you will about scapegoating the coach, but it's time for new blood on the sideline. It's time for a new voice in practice and in the locker room.

Brown is a typical example of a coach who no longer fits his role. The Cavs have changed a lot since Brown took the helm prior to the 2005-06 season. Back then, the Cavs were an undertalented group that lacked discipline and good basketball fundamentals. Brown was the

protege of quality coaches such as Gregg Popovich and Rick Carlisle. He understood that defense can take a team that lacks offensive talent and turn it into a winner.

From 2005 to '08, Brown was the right man for the Cavs job. The Cavs were a playoff underdog, and it was Brown's defensive scheming and constant preaching of defensive fundamentals and effort that led them to some of the proudest moments in franchise history: a six-game thriller over the Wizards in 2006 -- LeBron's first playoff series -- then nearly upsetting the Pistons in the next round. A Finals run in 2007. A near-upset of the Celtics as a 45-win team in 2008.

But then, in the summer of '08, Gilbert opened up his pocketbook and let Ferry acquire Mo Williams. The following summer, Shaq arrived. This past winter, it was Antawn Jamison.

Through a series of blockbuster trades, the Cavs amassed one of the best collections of offensive talent in the league. They didn't need to play like a gritty underdog anymore. They could win most games by outscoring the opponent. Suddenly, Brown's coaching was obsolete in the minds of the players, whether they would admit it or not.

In the span of about a year, the Cavs went from needing a coach who harps on mechanics and fundamentals to a coach who can manipulate a room full of egos for maximum effect. They need a basketball psychologist. But that's not Brown's strength. He's a basketball bookworm who has always been most comfortable in the film room and toting a dry-erase clipboard.

The Cavs, quite simply, need a veteran winning coach if they aspire to continue on as a veteran winning team. Brown will find work again, probably leading a team that is in need of "Winning Basketball 101" tutoring, like the '05 Cavs were. But he doesn't fit the Cavs now, and won't in the future.

The Cavs are, at their heart, a running team

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If the Cavs do end up firing Brown, they need to hire a coach who will nurture this team's true DNA, which was starkly absent in the playoffs when the team played slow, passive basketball.

The Cavs are a running team. They are an offensively-gifted team. It's time to stop pretending that they are anything else. They are not a lockdown defensive team. They are not a grind-it-out halfcourt team. They are an uptempo team that should be focusing on small lineups, increasing possession volume, increasing shot volume and viewing turnovers as a necessary evil --

forgivable as long as you keep pushing the ball and finding open shots.

For much of this season, Brown and Shaq combined to turn the Cavs into a slow-down team. When Shaq injured his thumb and spry youngster J.J. Hickson moved into the starting center spot, the Cavs had their hottest streak of the season.

It's not a coincidence. Over the past two seasons, the Cavs have always been at their best when they trotted out small, fast lineups that could run and score. When you looked up and down the lineup at athletes like LeBron, Hickson, Williams, Delonte West and Anderson Varejao, it was easy to see why. The Cavs' best players have been fast, active players. LeBron is the best fast break player in the league by a wide margin.

But the loss to Orlando in the '09 Eastern Conference Finals occurred, and the Cavs' brass decided the best course of action was to get bigger and stronger. Shaq fits the Cavs' makeup like an army boot fits Cinderella. Anthony Parker was reduced to a spot-up jump shooter, far from the dynamic role he had with the Raptors. Zydrunas Ilgauskas looked out of place as a starter in '09, and completely unfit for the floor as a reserve in the just-completed season.

If the last two seasons teach nothing else, it's that you shouldn't make moves just to match up with one team. A good team like the Cavs has an identity, and that identity is created by the makeup of the team. And the Cavs are a fast break team.

So, what to do about it?

It would be a moderate shock if Ferry wasn't retained as the Cavs GM, but whether he or his successor is running the show, it's time to build a team that can be competitive, interesting and draw fans to the The Q whether LeBron returns or not.

First off, hire a coach who is willing to let this team run while still keeping defense relevant. The time will come when defensive effort will be needed, but the coach needs to trust that a veteran team will know when that time is, or at least will be able to turn on the effort with very little prodding. And if they don't play D, they lose those games. That's how you get a team to be accountable.

The Cavs don't need to have a 24/7 obsession with defense, as Brown believes. After so many years, you don't need to drill them on it like you're drilling third-graders on multiplication tables.

Second, find a point guard who can run an uptempo offense. The ideal candidate would be relatively young, lightning quick, have a tremendous handle, reliable midrange jumper and the presence to command the floor. In other words, someone who can allow LeBron to move without the ball -- but more than that, someone with the ego and voice to dictate the game to LeBron. It could be a tough task. LeBron isn't used to not having control of where the ball goes, and he is most certainly not used to being told what to do.

Mo Williams is not that guy. Nor is Delonte West. They are auxiliary scoring options, not floor generals.

If I'm dreaming, I'm looking at Chris Paul, the current centerpiece of the cash-strapped Hornets -- a team that has a lower-cost future point guard to develop in Darren Collison. My faith in humanity would be restored if the Cavs could land Paul, who also happens to be one of LeBron's best friends in the league.

If I'm being more realistic, I'd be looking at Grizzlies guard and Ohio State product Mike Conley, Kings guard Beno Udrih and Rodney Stuckey of the Pistons. The Timberwolves also have a small army of point guards, including the rights to Spanish phenom Ricky Rubio.

If you have a point guard who can run a fast-paced offense, it's time to put the young legs out there -- mainly Hickson. J.J. should be the starting center for this team moving forward. He is undersized at 6'-9", but if he isn't starting at center, that means a slow, lumbering guy probably is. And while it's true that centers are the outlet-pass guy and don't necessarily need to be fast, it's also true that the other team is getting all five guys back on defense while your center ambles into the frontcourt. So you either slow up the tempo or play five-on-four for the first 8-to-10 seconds of the shot clock. Enough time for the other team to set their defense.

With that in mind, it's time to bid adieu to Shaq and Z. Shaq, it was real. Thanks for your time. Z, No. 11 will hang from the rafters in a few years. But your time as a Cavs player is over.

A fast-paced, active team will be competitive without LeBron and likely remain a 60-win contender with LeBron. In either case, the Cavs make the best of their situation. With LeBron, they're an offensive juggernaut. Without LeBron, they can still win, and the gate receipt apocalypse that many are predicting for the post-LeBron Cavs might be diluted, if not averted entirely.

Yeah, there is still the little thing about beating Boston and Orlando in the playoffs. A small, fast Cavs team might still have trouble handling Dwight Howard and Boston's beefy frontcourt. But after the frustrating playoffs exits of the past two springs, you have to think positively:

If you're going to get drilled by Orlando and Boston every spring, you might as well look good doing it.