

Ten Questions That Will Define The Cavs Season

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}
Tuesday, October 31 2006 7:00 PM -

Finally. It's Cavs season bay-bee. The Q is gonna be a rockin' tonight as Mr. Arenas and the Wizards come to town for their 8 PM tilt with our Cavs. In this excellent opening night piece, John Hnat asks the ten questions that will determine the fate of the 2006-2007 Cleveland Cavaliers.



It's the beginning of the NBA season, which means that it's time for armchair analysts to crawl out of the woodwork with their various projections and dissections of the season ahead. To that, I say: me too!

Here are the ten questions (why ten? Because it is a much rounder number than nine or eleven) that will define the 2006-07 season for the Cleveland Cavaliers Presented By Cub Cadet:

1. ***Will LeBron James play 82 games?***

This question is the one that most everybody takes for granted, and yet it's also the most important question by far. The Cavs have been fortunate to have a healthy LeBron thus far – he has missed a total of eight games in his three seasons – and they need that health to continue. There is no need to describe just how profound an impact LeBron has on the Cavaliers, both on and off the court. He is clearly one of the top talents in the game; and at 21 years old, as scary as it seems, he still has plenty of room to improve.

LeBron has had a couple of very busy years. He was at the top of the NBA in minutes played last season, and then had a rather grueling summer with the World Championships. We have to hope that he feeds off of all that activity, instead of being worn out from it.

2. ***Will a legitimate backup to LeBron emerge?***

This question goes hand in hand with the first one. At small forward, the Cavs have LeBron and ... um ... well ... I'll have to get back to you on that one. The Cavs do have defensive specialist Ira Newble (where "defensive specialist" = "he can't do anything on offense") and the wildly inconsistent Sasha Pavlovic as candidates. Also, with so many talented big men, there is the possibility of running with a larger lineup at times, with Donyell Marshall sliding into the three spot.

The key point is that while LeBron is probably able and willing to continue playing 45

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minutes or so per game, that course is short-sighted. The Cavs need somebody to step up in those minutes (hopefully 8-10 per game) when James is on the bench. We're not asking for star-level play; we just need to see somebody who will hold down the fort long enough for LeBron to guzzle a Gator ... er, PowerAde and get his wind back.

3. *Will Larry Hughes play more than 35 games?*

When the Cavs signed [Mr. I Heart Strippers](#) to a long-term contract in the 2005-06 off season, they knew that they were not getting the Iron Horse of basketball. Hughes has been plagued by various maladies throughout his career, averaging 63 games per season during his three years with the Wizards. But that was a Ripkenian performance compared to last season, when a broken finger (and an unsuccessful first surgery) resulted in Hughes missing 46 regular season games. Welcome to The Cleveland Experience, Larry! As if that wasn't enough, Hughes' younger brother tragically died during the playoffs, causing Larry to miss several games.

From all reports, Hughes' finger is still not 100 percent, but it is definitely better than last year. That is good news, as the Cavs need Larry to be the Robin to LeBron's Batman. Hughes' injury resulted in more playing time for Pavlovic and the now-departed Luke Jackson and Flip Murray. That was not a good thing. The Cavs need Hughes to return to his Washington form, to play tenacious defense and provide the extra scoring punch needed from the backcourt.

4. *Will the Cavs move around on offense?*

Let's play word association for a minute. I am going to describe a scene, and I want you to say the first thing that comes into your mind.

Five guys standing around. One of them is dribbling a basketball. Dribble. Dribble. Dribble. Dribble. Dribble. Dribble. Dribble. Dribble. Dribble. Dribble. "Five seconds!" Shot.

If you responded with "the Cavs offense", you win! Far too often last year, the Cavs' consisted of four guys standing around, watching LeBron dribble, and then drive and shoot. It was predictable and did not create any opportunities for other players on the floor. The extent of the Cavs' offensive "set" was running the pick and roll with Zydrunas Ilgauskas or Anderson Varejao.

This year looks like it may be different, and that is a Good Thing. In the preseason, the Cavs demonstrated much more motion on offense, often running screens and generally having players in motion. The Cavs' coaches (both Mike Brown and his assistants) have been quoted as saying that they have worked to implement more motion into the offense. It may not gel at first, but it should serve the team well if they stick with it. On the other hand, if they revert to the "pass the ball to LeBron and watch him" offensive "set", then they will continue to be predictable and prone to extended slumps.

5. *Will Donyell Marshall find the fountain of youth?*

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In the 2002-2005 seasons, Donyell Marshall successfully redefined himself as a big man who shoots three pointers. Last year, he was a three point shooter who happened to be a big man. That difference isn't just semantics. Last year, three point attempts made up almost 60% of Marshall's field goal attempts, and he got to the free throw line about one and a half times per game, on average. That may be OK if your name is Kyle Korver, but Marshall is a power forward with some nice post moves. The Cavs need to take advantage of Marshall's skills in the paint. In turn, that should give Marshall more open opportunities from long range (where he slid from a 0.416 percentage in 2004-05 to 0.324 last season). Marshall looks like he spent the entire off season in the gym, and hopefully those results will translate to the hardwood.

6. *Will Shannon Brown or Daniel Gibson crack the rotation?*

At least for the first half of the season, I expect the answer to be "no". I expect to see a lot of them on the bench, wearing the finest suits they have to offer.

And I do not see this as a bad thing.

Especially when you are drafting towards the end of the first round, you should not expect your draft pick to step in and be an immediate contributor. Frankly, if you are in the position for a rookie to have such an impact, you're probably not that good a team. (Here's a game. Use your memory – no fair going to Google. The top four teams last year were the Heat, the Mavericks, the Spurs, and the Pistons. Name their first-round draft picks from the previous draft.)

The Cavs have a very set nine man rotation – James, Hughes, Eric Snow, Damon Jones, David Wesley, Ilgauskas, Drew Gooden, Varejao, and Marshall. I expect Scot Pollard to get some minutes here and there, and Newble and Pavlovic will get garbage time here and there. That leaves the three newbies – Brown, Gibson, and second-year player Dwayne Jones – with a lot of time to wave towels.

That's not to say that Brown and Gibson are bad players. Not at all. Brown was a pleasant surprise when he was still on the board for the Cavs, and Gibson has about as much promise as one can expect from a second rounder. I would not be surprised to see Brown force himself into the shooting guard mix along with Wesley and Damon Jones, particularly if Hughes does miss extended time as his history suggests he will. As for Gibson, the opportunity is definitely there at the point guard position.

(The answers are: Heat, Wayne Simien; Mavericks, no pick; Spurs, Ian Mahinmi; Pistons, Jason Maxiell. Those players combined to play all of 573 minutes last season.)

7. *Will someone, anyone step forward to claim the point guard position?*

First things first: the Cavs do not need a Steve Nash or Jason Kidd to run the show. Between James and Hughes, the Cavs have plenty of ball-handling ability at other positions. They do not need a true run-the-show type of point guard. They just need a complementary player, one who can handle the ball a little bit, knock down the open shot when the defense

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doubles LeBron or Hughes, and play solid defense at the other end.

Even with that lower level of need, the Cavs' point guards have just not been getting it done. I like Eric Snow and think he is the perfect fit for what the Cavs need. Or at least, he was back in 2001. The 2006 version of Eric Snow has almost no offensive game. He was consistently left wide open by opposing defenses last year, almost being dared to hit the open shot, and he couldn't cash it out often enough. He still plays some good defense and is a very heady, smart player, and I do not want to trivialize those contributions. Damon Jones had a terrible year; he needs to focus less on the Rockette leg kicks and "three on a platter" hand signals, and more on playing an all-around game. He has admitted that he was not in the best of shape last season (something about not wanting to jeopardize his free agent payday with a workout-induced injury), and is supposedly in much better shape this time around. That would be a good start.

As mentioned previously, the Cavs do have Daniel Gibson in the wings. I don't expect the rookie to get much run this year. But if Snow and Jones do not get it done, hopefully Coach Brown will have the fortitude to give the rookie a chance.

8. *Will Scot Pollard provide some necessary backbone?*

I am a huge Pollard fan. I see him as sort of Dennis Rodman lite: he is a big guy who throws the opposition off with his hair styles and funky appearance ... all while fighting for every rebound, collecting floor burns the way I used to collect baseball cards, and providing a tough, not-gonna-back-down presence. He's not going to need to be Rodman here. He will get maybe 10 minutes per game, and I expect a few DNP-CDs. But I see him as a terrific complement for the Cavs' second line, and a guy who can shoulder more of the burden on those nights when Z gets into early foul trouble or leaves his jumper at home.

9. *Will the light go on for Drew Gooden, especially on defense?*

I want to start the discussion of Gooden with two facts.

First, Drew Gooden just turned 25 years old.

Second, Drew Gooden has played for six different head coaches thus far in his NBA career. This season will be the first time that he has played for the same coach for two consecutive seasons.

Gooden has a lot of talent, especially on the offensive end. He has some very nice post moves, an underrated outside shot, and the temperament to understand that he is not going to be the first or second option in this offense. Defensively ... let's just say that he is trying. As in he is trying to play defense, and as in he is trying for the Cavs' coaches. He's still good for at least two bonehead plays per game (will somebody please get the guy a reliable set of hands?), but that is just the bad that you have to take along with all of the good.

Optimistically, being in a stable situation will help Gooden. He'll be in his second year in

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the same system, instead of the first year in yet another new system, and that familiarity should help. He is a willing rebounder and generally has a lot of energy. If he can just continue to learn defensive positioning and where to be on rotations, he'll be a big reason why the Cavs get to the next level.

10. *How will players be affected by the new ball?*

That's my white flag. That's my admission that I can't come up with a legitimate tenth question. I guess we'll have to be stuck on number nine, just like the Beatles' White Album. Sure, the new ball has been almost universally panned by the players, but they will adjust, and life will go on.

The answers to these ten ... er, nine questions will tell us what kind of a season it will be. And we'll start getting those answers tonight at The Q.