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But Friday's 110-108 Cavaliers loss to the Suns was a rare exception. Sure, there was blame to go around. After setting a blistering-hot pace with 69 first-half points, the Cavs scored just 39 in the second half. They let the Suns convert 17 three-pointers, a record versus the Cavs.

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The Cavs played one of the league's elite teams, and not-so-arguably the league's best offense, held a double-digit lead for the majority of the game, but ran into trouble at the end against a team well-versed in fourth quarter basketball. Shawn Marion's lone bucket of the game with three seconds left was the game-winner. The Cavs had every right in the world to tip their hats to Steve Nash and Company, and move on.

But the Cavs -- more specifically, LeBron James -- didn't. And the fact that they didn't shows that this is a team starting to behave like a contender.

Following an apparent miscommunication with Larry Hughes on the game's final play, LeBron left the floor with a glower that could have killed upon eye contact. He kicked a garbage can in the hallway to the locker room.

LeBron might have been furious with how the final seconds played out, but his reaction said something more. He expected to win this game. He was furious that he and his team didn't. Everything in his demeanor said "If we could play the final minutes over again, I *know* we'd win."

It's a long way from Early-Career LeBron, the giggling college-age kid whom losses barely fazed. This is the LeBron channeling the competitive fire of Michael Jordan. This is the LeBron who has had a taste of playoff success and wants to get back to the Finals for another crack at the best of the West.

At this point, maybe a lot of you are saying "Well, then Danny Ferry had better get on the phone and start making trades, because there is no way LeBron is getting past Detroit or Boston with this rag-tag supporting cast." You might be right ... but then again, maybe not.

Do you realize the straw LeBron has been able to spin into gold in the past year? It's almost intimidating to think about how little help he needs to take a team with utterly average talent and turn them into borderline-great.

For their lack of impressive stats, the guys who surround LeBron are starting to grasp how they fit around him.

As a team, the Cavs are playing good defense, even excellent defense in the fourth quarter. For the first time since the LeBron era began, the Cavs are starting to become a good ball-movement team, able to excel at playing in the halfcourt beyond "Give the ball to LeBron and get out of the way."

Daniel Gibson and Damon Jones are knocking down threes on the wings off LeBron's penetrations. Zydrunas Ilgauskas, Drew Gooden and Anderson Varejao are cleaning the glass to the tune of more than eight rebounds per game each. To boot, Z and Andy are each averaging more than three offensive boards per game.

In other words, the Cavs are becoming a fundamentally-sound team that moves the ball, plays solid five-man defense, rebounds at both ends of the floor looks for the open shot and believes they can own the fourth quarter. They aren't quite the Spurs yet, but they beat the Spurs at their own game less than two weeks ago.

In any sport, if you have a team that plays the right way and minimizes mistakes, it can compensate for a lack of superlative talent across the board. The Spurs and Patriots are the blueprint. Those teams have owned the first decade of the new millennium in their respective sports.

Certainly, Ferry should always be looking to better the Cavs' roster. They still have a need for an offense-facilitating point guard, and a shooting guard in the mold of Michael Redd would do wonders for stretching defenses. But I think there is definitely something to the idea that if you keep a group of players together for a while, teach them the right things and let them succeed and fail together, eventually you'll end up with a seasoned team that knows what it can accomplish.

The Cavs have set the pace for themselves since Christmas by beating Dallas and San Antonio on the road. Twice this season, they have had double-digit leads against Phoenix, only to lose in the fourth quarter.

The net result is a team -- and superstar leader -- that now expects to win when they take the floor. The Cavs of 2008 do not feel overmatched heading into any game. The proof is in their 9-2 record since the new year.

It's a giant step in the right direction for this team. They are now winning the battle they had lost so many times before: the battle inside their own collective head.

If LeBron and his teammates keep expecting to win every game, and backing it up with their play, it's far from a pipe dream for fans to expect more June basketball in Cleveland.