Don

Is this Mike Brown or Mike Fratello coaching this team? It's been hard to tell as of late, and despite Fratello's recent firing in Memphis, I mean that as a compliment.

Don't look now, but the Cavaliers have quietly evolved into one of the league's best defensive teams under Brown. The team is allowing just 92.1 points per game, good for the fifth stingiest total in all of basketball. Only the Mavericks, Magic, Spurs, and Rockets have allowed fewer points per contest, and all of those teams are playing .600 ball or better.

If the Cavs can maintain this pace, they will be the best defensive Cavalier team since the 1998-1999 team. From 1994-1999, Fratello's Cavaliers squads allowed less than 90 points per game for five straight seasons. Fratello's style of play incensed fans; but also produced five winning seasons in a row with marginally talented squads.

Clearly, this year's Cavs team is more talented than any of the Fratello teams of the mid to late nineties. And Brown has this group playing great defense. In addition to being ranked fifth in the league in points allowed, the Cavs are also third in the NBA in opponent's field goal percentage, and are ranked fourth in opponent's three point percentage.

What makes these numbers even more impressive is the fact that this is pretty much the exact same team from last season. A team that was very average defensively during the regular season. Brown's defensive preachings are beginning to take effect. Let's take a quick look at last seasons defensive numbers compared to this years:

2005-2006: *95.4 ppg (10th), 45.5% FG% (18th), 35.6 three point % (15th), 6.9 steals (18th), 4.8 blocks (18th), 12.7 opponents turnovers (26th)*

2006-2007: *92.1 ppg (5th), 44.3% FG% (3rd), 32.3% three point % (4th), 6.4 steals (26th), 5.1 blocks (9th), 13.9 opponents turnovers (24th)*

Not surprisingly, the Cavs have really stepped it up defensively since the return of Larry Hughes. The Cavs have held eight of their sixteen opponents under 90 points since Hughes has returned from his injury, after holding just four of eighteen under 90 before he came back.

Hughes has been incredible defensively this season, and should he stay healthy … is well on his way to NBA All-Defense honors of some sort. Hughes has done very well guarding the opponent's top backcourt scoring threat all season, regardless of whether or not they play the point or the off-guard position. Brown has been using Hughes more frequently to defend opposing point guards, allowing Eric Snow to use his strength and savvy to check bigger players that aren't as quick.

Anderson Varejao has also really evolved as a defender this year, and has been very good in his role of "annoying" some of the most talented frontcourt scorers in the league. Despite averaging just 22 minutes a night, Varejao has drawn a mind-boggling 36 charges in 34 games, placing him high atop the league leaders. Eric Snow continues to be one of the league's better defenders of bigger shooting guards despite the fact his lack of quickness limits him in certain match-ups. And LeBron James and Zydrunas Ilgauskas still get caught "watching" at times, but James athleticism and Z's size help create a lot of bad looks for opponents.

The Cavs haven't been perfect defensively, but they've made a lot of progress. The team still ranks very low in turnovers caused and steals, a byproduct of Brown's safe and sound defensive scheme, which frowns on risk taking, and preaches positioning, help, and making every opposing shot as difficult as possible.

As I write this column, the team readies themselves for a 10:30 PM tip tonight at Phoenix, the second game of a seven game West Coast trip. Even if they give up 115 points tonight, and triple digits a couple more times on the trip … progress has been made with this team on the defensive end. And with that, the Cavs should be an even more dangerous foe come playoff time, especially given the weakened status of the NBA's Eastern Conference.

There hasn't been a team in the last 25 years that has won a title by trying to outscore people, and Mike Brown knows that after having been a part of championship teams as an assistant. While Brown still makes you scratch your head with some of the things he does offensively and with the rotation, he's clearly had an effect on this squad at the defensive end with his incessant harpings on "getting stops". And "getting stops" is what wins titles. The Cavaliers may not be ready to make that step this season, but it appears that Mike Brown is putting the right framework in place for that to happen in the next couple of seasons.