With a little over a month to go in the regular season, the Cavaliers look to be in pretty good shape. Playing arguably their best basketball of the season, the Cavs have rolled up a 7-1 record in March and have won eleven of their last 15. Papa Cass takes some time out to assess the rest of the Eastern Conference, indicating how queasy each of the other contenders make him as a potential playoff opponent of the Cavaliers.

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LeBron James is back on his horse, dominating games like he did down the stretch last year. Larry Hughes has experienced a renaissance of sorts as the team's point guard. All told, this team appears to be rounding into form at the right time.

But there's still this feeling of uneasiness I can't shake. It goes beyond the standard Cleveland dread. It goes beyond offensive execution and free-throw shooting to something the Cavs
really can't control.

You see, the Eastern Conference playoff picture isn't just clouded by slow movement, spotty play and a small army of would-be 45-win teams. It's also upside-down in some respects.

Many of the traditional East powers are fighting for the back four spots in the East playoff race. If the Cavs can clinch the second spot in the East, where they currently stand, it's no guarantee of an easy ride to the second round.

As of Monday night, the fifth seed was occupied by Chicago, the sixth by Miami, the seventh by Indiana and the eighth by New York. Knocking on the door to the eighth spot were Orlando, a half game out, and New Jersey, a full game out.

And to be honest, the only teams in that gaggle that do not scare me at least a little bit are Indiana and Orlando. The Cavs should have a relatively easy time dispatching either one of those teams.

But playing the rest will cause me to breathe heavy, at least until the Cavs can go up by two games.

Below is my Cavs "Postseason Fear Factor," a gauge for the level of nervousness you should have during potential matchups with the other playoff contenders in the East. Each team is assigned a number value from 1 (relaxing on the beach) to 10 (Godzilla is attacking).

Chicago Bulls

Like the Cavs, the Bulls have had trouble putting the ball in the basket this year. Unlike the Cavs, they have a legitimate excuse: They have few good scoring options.

Outside of the occasional Ben Gordon blowout, the Bulls really have no dominant scorers, and certainly not inside. But what they don't have in offense they can more than make up for with a staunch defense centered on grunt-worker supreme Ben Wallace.

In last month's win in Cleveland, the Bulls gave Cavs fans every reason why they should be wary should the two teams match up in the playoffs. The Bulls frustrated the Cavs by taking away lanes to the basket. The Cavs response was to go into full-on "the hell with it" mode and begin chucking up bricks from 20 feet. At Chicago's offensive end, Wallace bullied his way to offensive rebounds and a ton of second-chance points for the Bulls.

The front six or seven of the Cavs' roster is, taken as a sum, more talented and more diverse than the front six or seven of the Bulls. The Cavs, by all rights, should win a playoff matchup with Chicago. But if the Cavs allow the Bulls to assert themselves defensively, and LeBron and Hughes start getting frustrated by their lack of chances to push the ball and penetrate, all bets are off.

Postseason Fear Factor: 6

Detroit Pistons

Last week, we saw what the Cavs can do against the Pistons when LeBron is sufficiently pissed-off and has a little help from his friends. It was a win, but it still wasn't easy.

The Pistons are the deepest team in the East with the most playoff experience. The absence of Ben Wallace hurts them at the defensive end, but the addition of Chris Webber helps them at the offensive end. Call it a push.

If the Cavs can get to the East Finals against Detroit, I'll simply take a wait-and-see attitude from there. Maybe we get a pleasant surprise like what almost happened last year, but if any team from the East knocks off Detroit, it's going to be a pretty major upset.

Postseason Fear Factor: 9

Indiana Pacers

One of several traditional East powers that have fallen on hard times this year. The Pacers were probably moving with an eye toward this summer when they dispatched Stephen Jackson, Al Harrington and Sarunas Jasikevicius to Golden State earlier this season, but because the East is so putrid, they are hanging around the playoff picture in spite of themselves.

Normally, I'd say Indiana is a dangerous squad. They have one of the best coaches in the league in Rick Carlisle. But with virtually all the scoring punch, save for Jermaine O'Neal, gone from the roster, this isn't a team that is harboring any delusions of a deep playoff run this year.

If the Cavs are lucky, the Pacers will hang around long enough for Cleveland to draw them in the first round.

Postseason Fear Factor: 2

Miami Heat

Miami is so scorching hot, having won six straight as of Monday, they are on the verge of overtaking Washington for first place in the Southeast Division.

The Cavs had better hope they do take first place and end up among the first four seeds. This is not a team anyone wants to face in the first round. The way they are playing, if Dwyane
Wade returns, even at 75 percent of normal, they might actually be a safe bet to make it to at least the second round.

Much like the Pistons, the Heat are loaded with veterans and they know what it takes to win. Their season might look rather lukewarm to this point, but this is still a really dangerous team.

Postseason Fear Factor: 7

New Jersey Nets

Another traditional East power fighting from behind this year. This Nets team is an older and more banged-up version of the teams that have been playoff stalwarts throughout this decade. But I'm not about to write off any Nets team that can have Jason Kidd, Richard Jefferson and Vince Carter in uniform for a playoff series.

In the Cavs' case, they have traditionally matched up terribly with the Nets. Vince Carter, in particular, has tormented the Cavs throughout his career.

The Cavs really have no business losing a playoff series to the Nets. But you can't discount the Carter factor and the fact that Kidd makes the Nets' offense look about twice as good as it actually is.

Postseason Fear Factor: 5

New York Knicks

Oh, come on. You can't possibly be scared of the Knicks. Right? Isiah Thomas finished up the work of his predecessor, running the team into the ground, then gets them back onto the fringe of the playoff hunt, and his reward? A
multiyear
contract extension.

This team is clueless-double-squared-to-the-ninth-power with a cherry on top.

But the Cavs always manage to find a way to have at least one or two embarrassing losses against the Knicks every year. Which is why you can't let your guard down.

If the Cavs lose a series to the Knicks, the entire roster should be forced to spend a week at Sing Sing. But they shouldn't. I mean, they can't. Right?
LeBron
would never let that happen. That's just common sense. Right?

Postseason Fear Factor: 4

Orlando Magic

The time to be scared of the Magic isn't now. It's two or three years from now when Dwight Howard makes the transition from boy to man to "size XXXL athletic supporter" man's man.

At some point, Howard is going to learn the ropes of the NBA playoffs, and he is going to be a 20-point, 15-rebound beast carrying his team to the conference finals. This year, however, he will probably get his first taste, and it's going to be bitter.

Postseason Fear Factor: 2

Toronto Raptors

The thing that makes the Raptors scary is they don't know enough to fear the competition. Chris Bosh, Andrea Bargnani and company are going to fly into the playoffs as easy winners of the NBA's worst division, thinking they world-beaters.

It's going to be up to another team to bring them back to reality. The Cavs can do it if need be, and should do it. But it might take six or seven games of pulling the reigns to get the young Raptors to realize they aren't quite ready for prime time.

Ignorance can be bliss, especially when it's up to someone else to put you in your place.

Postseason Fear Factor: 4

Washington Wizards

It's not so much the revenge factor that has me concerned about a Cavs-Wizards rematch. Le Bron has proven that, when the game is on the line, he can play smart basketball, take the ball to

the hoop, make the correct pass, even get a defensive stop. Gilbert Arenas' clutch-time checklist includes shoot, shoot, shoot and shoot.

When Arenas' shot isn't falling, his confidence goes in the toilet. He can't really hurt a team any other way, or doesn't really want to.

But in last year's playoff series, the Cavs had a lot of breaks go their way in winning three of four games in the final seconds. This year, should the teams rematch, who is to say the law of averages won't catch up with the Cavs and Arenas won't be the hero?

If the Cavs and Wizards do rematch, I'd feel a lot more comfortable if the Cavs could just play dominant defense and take clutch shots out of the equation.

Postseason Fear Factor: 6