Mike Brown is an easy target for most Cavs fans. He's the second youngest coach in the NBA. He has little to no background teaching or coaching offense. And every season with LeBron James under contract is precious time. But as Erik Cassano points out in his latest ... this is no easy job here in Cleveland. And Brown has navigated the waters pretty well.

When the Cavaliers offense sputters, coach Mike Brown can shoulder more than his share of the blame.

He made his name as a defensive assistant coach, a reputation that allowed him to get the first head coaching job of his career at the NBA level despite no prior experience as a bench boss. Offense never really factored in to the equation that rocketed Mike Brown from Denver Nuggets intern to head coach of the Cavs in a decade and a half.

In his two seasons as Cavs coach, it has been a struggle for the team to piece together any extended stretch of competent basketball at the offensive end. Even when they win, the offense is still subject to long dead spots, lazy jump-shooting and way too many turnovers.

Even at their best, the Cavs' offensive execution never seems to rise above a B-minus grade for an entire game.

When asked for the cause, thousands of index fingers reflexively arrow toward Brown, the man who could write a doctoral thesis on defensive schemes, but apparently stares at his offensive playbook like it's a collection of ancient Hebrew manuscripts. Or the stick-figure doodlings of a two-year-old.

One of the easiest things to do as a sports fan is finger the head coach as an idiot if your team is going through a rough stretch. Obviously, one might think, if the team is executing poorly and coming out of timeouts flat, it has to be that the coach is ineffectual. Right?

It's why Brown, Romeo Crennel and Eric Wedge are the understudies of Larry, Curly and Moe in the eyes of many Clevelanders. But for their shortcomings, Crennel
at least has the excuse of little talent and Wedge could lean on what his boss, Mark Shapiro,

called a "historically bad" bullpen a year ago.

What's Brown's excuse? As we know, every season with LeBron James under contract is precious time. If there is no progress, if the Cavs backslide and lose in the first round of the playoffs this year, it's a wasted season in the eyes of many fans, a wasted season that falls directly into the lap of Brown, who can't seem to put a halfway-decent offense on the floor despite having one of the game's best all-around offensive players, and a supporting cast that, at least on paper, should provide some degree of firepower.

But it's not all on Brown, nor should it be.

It doesn't get a lot of press because this isn't New York or Los Angeles, but Brown has one of the toughest head coaching gigs in the NBA.

The second-youngest coach in the league behind the Nets' Lawrence Frank, Brown stepped out of the assistant coach ranks and right into a crucible. Perhaps he didn't entirely know it at the time, but he was taking over a team in a title-starved city that was clutching its first honest-to-goodness sports superstar since Jim Brown.

Clevelanders don't want to wait for a championship. More than four decades is long enough. So at the first sign of Brown sputtering, the wailing and gnashing of teeth begins among the populace, prodded along by the media.

The psychological landscape of Cleveland sports fans and media automatically makes becoming LeBron James' head coach a mine field of criticism festooned with unrealistic win-title-now expectations. And if you tell the fans that our expectations are too high, we'll accuse you of making excuses for yourself.

So who does Brown have to turn to? His team? They've got his back, right? All for one and one for all. That's the motto.

Well, not exactly.

It's not that LeBron and Company go out of their way to circumvent Brown's authority. It's not that they don't take him or their jobs seriously. It's just that LeBron is "The Chosen One," Larry Hughes is the highest-paid player on the team, Damon Jones wears suits that mimic the fur pattern of Serengeti wildcats, and ... well, getting this team to march to the same drumbeat is rather difficult.

We all wonder why Brown can't seem to get this team to play hard night in and night out. It could be that, no matter how hard he tries, he's never going to be able to squeeze maximum effort out of LeBron, Hughes and Drew Gooden every night. They're just going to do their own thing for a variety of reasons that range from ego to fatigue to entering games completely spaced out (Gooden, my eyes are pointing at your eyes.)

Brown can go Gunnery Sergeant Hartman and threaten to PT them until a certain bodily orifice is sucking a certain liquid dairy product, and it might not make a crumb of difference. If Brown were replaced by Larry Brown or Phil Jackson or Rick Carlisle, it might not make a difference.

We might find over the next few years that LeBron is going to play hard when LeBron wants to play hard, no other time, and no amount of discipline will convince him otherwise, because he's LeBron
.

Yet when LeBron doesn't exert maximum effort, when the Cavs come out flat and lose to a lottery team, Brown is the man squarely on the hot seat. He's the one not saying the right things in the huddle, the one who isn't reaching his players.

Brown is an inexperienced coach learning on the job in a city that treats anything and everything involving LeBron as a matter of national security. He is trying to build a team the right way according to how he learned from Bernie Bickerstaff, Gregg Popovich and Carlisle, but in a city that doesn't want to wait for a title any longer, a city that has pinned all hope for a title in the near future on his team.

Brown is trying to reform a collection of score-first players into a defense-first team and has found them less than receptive to the transition. His entire job hangs on the willingness of his sometimes-moody, not-yet-totally-mature superstar to accept what he is saying, then go out and play with fire, which he doesn't always do.

Brown doesn't deserve an endless mulligan. He certainly has a big slice of culpability to eat when his team fails. But he eats it willingly, doesn't pass the buck (except occasionally to the refs), and remains focused on improving the team.

If Brown ends up with mediocre grades for his coaching effort this season, two areas in which he should get high marks are attitude and effort, which is something that can't be said for most of the rest of the team.