This is just one of those days ... it's near impossible to think about or focus on anything other than Game Four tonight between the Cavaliers and the Pistons. Gary Benz also has Cavs on the mind today, penning another great column for us on the big series between the heated Eastern Conference rivals. Gary says regardless of how this series turns out, the Cavs are sending a message: your time is running out Detroit.

It's been an interesting week or so for the 22-year olds among us. For many that age, which is to say four years removed from high school, they have already or will be soon graduating from college and looking for that first job. Parties will be thrown and toasts will be made as they begin their journey toward adulthood. No one expects much from them because, heck, they're only 22.

Then there is LeBron James. To say he's taken a slightly different path in his 22 years would be a slight understatement. Rather than toil in college, he went out and become an international superstar and icon, not simply a basketball player but a brand unto himself. But in the process, he raised the expectations of those around him to perhaps unrealistic heights, something no one typically expects of someone that age.

We smile and shake our heads knowingly when someone like Lindsay Lohan, barely younger than James, crashes and burns and ends up in rehab. If you don't like your stars of the Hollywood variety, one can spend the day compiling a list of young sports stars that flamed out similarly. The fame, the money, the pressure, it's hard to handle, especially at that age. But with James, it's always been

different. He not only has to handle the pressure and the fame and money but the barrel full, but he has to continuously exceed the increasingly unrealistic expectations of everyone around him or else be branded a failure.

It's hard to say where James may end up in the pecking order of great players once his NBA days are done, but for anyone lucky enough to attend Game Three of the Eastern Conference Championship between the Cavaliers and the Detroit Pistons Sunday night, James provided his greatest service yet-he made even the casual among us care about pro basketball again. And whether he's 22 or 32, matters little. What matters most is that he's accomplished what seemed impossible and that's something that can never be taken away.

And don't think that James' task is the result one big victory or because of any particular victory, actually. It's really because James, in the way that he plays the game, has chosen to show anyone willing to invest a few hours of time that NBA basketball, played at the kind of level that only kids like James can play it at, brings the same indescribable thrills, the same giddy highs and the same depressing lows as any sport anywhere.

One of the most frustrating things to basketball fans is the great disparity between the regular NBA season and the playoffs. The intensity, such a key component of the playoffs, is hardly visible during the regular season. Football, with only 16 games, doesn't have that luxury. Baseball, which seemingly floats along for months, has always had a different rhythm and, frankly, with its pace and its imperfect nature, it's difficult to detect how hard a player is playing anyway. But NBA basketball, with its constant motion and fans sitting just feet away from the game, is a much easier read. That's why it's always been criticized for the seemingly causal attitude of the players during the regular season as compared to the different gear most are able to find once the playoffs hit.

Maybe it has something to do with the fact that eight teams in each conference make the NBA playoffs. But with the resurrection of the Cavs under James, Cleveland fans are quickly relearning the real ways of the NBA. For example,

what's most apparent is that the players and coaches, the smart ones anyway, use the regular season as a means to an end--seeding for the playoffs. The Pistons, now playing in their fifth Eastern Conference finals, knew they didn't need to win 60+ games this year to be considered great; they only needed to win 51 in order to get the top seed. Based on the make-up of that team, it's apparent they chose to win 53. The extra energy necessary to win 10 more games in order to be compared with Dallas hardly seemed worth it in that context. It's why Detroit has been one of the top teams in the league for years.

Dallas, which seemed on the precipice of greatness this year, regressed. Perhaps driven by the desires of its owner to be that showcase team, the Mavericks compiled a gaudy 67-15 record regular season record but found itself taking an early exit from the playoffs to a clearly inferior team, victims of an overconfidence borne by its regular season prowess. The same is true with Phoenix. Like Dallas, it ran hard during the regular season, winning 61 games, but was spent by the second round of the playoffs. Maybe it's just a coincidence that the final four teams all had victory totals in the 50s, but it seems unlikely.

It would be too much to suggest that James at his age has gotten the Cavs to the point where they can play to a seed, but it seems like they are on that road nonetheless. One gets the feeling, though, that if the Cavs really had been a threat to take the number one seed from Detroit, the Pistons would have simply won an extra game or two to hold their position.

But even if the Cavs don't survive this particular series, there is no question that there is a transition taking place in the Eastern Conference and even if you don't recognize it, there's no question that the Pistons do. Right now, the Cavs are extracting a heavy price on Detroit again, just as they did last year in the playoffs. Should the Pistons prevail in this series, they aren't likely to have much left in the tank against the Spurs, who look to prevail against a Utah team that is looking more and more like the Cleveland of the West.

Detroit, for all its experience, is starting to look its age. The average age of the

Pistons starting five is almost 31 years of age. The average age for the Cavs starters, on the other hand, is 26. If that doesn't seem like much, just consider that the average Pistons starter has played well over 400 games more than the average Cavs starter. That's a lot of running up and down the court and bumping and shoving in the lane. Experience has its place, particularly in the playoffs, but there comes a time where experience is just a euphemism for age, particularly old age and that time may just be creeping up on the Pistons. And, like it or not, those bumps and bruises that healed so quickly at 22 linger much longer at 32. Detroit Pistons forward Rasheed Wallace now takes extended breathers during games. When he wasn't in the game, forward Chris Webber sat on the bench with an ice pack strapped to his back. Tayshaun Prince, the relative youngster of the bunch, spent a fair amount of time with an ice pack on his leg.

Whether or not the Pistons can muster that last bit of energy to put themselves in the NBA finals, one can almost sense that they know their window is closing and it is James and his teammates who have their fingers on the sill. There was a point in Sunday night's game where Wallace looked simply exhausted. The James dunk directly over Wallace earlier in the quarter was the precursor, but with 2:33 left in the fourth and the Cavs nursing an 81-76 lead, James had the ball in his hands on the left perimeter. As Wallace stepped out to throw an outstretched hand in his face, James sank a beautiful three-pointer sending the crowd into its 20th frenzy of the night and forcing the Pistons to call time. As Wallace walked toward the bench, he could hardly believe what had just taken place. Shaking his head in disbelief and headed for a quick rest, it was apparent nonetheless that Wallace knew the game was over. There was simply no way that his aging body could match-up to James this late in the game.

There has been much written about James this past week, a lot of which has been negative. Loudmouth commentators, paid to be provocative, called James out for passing to a wide-open Donyell Marshall. Those same commentators complain that James hasn't taken the team on his back, whatever that means. The James supporters on the other hand have taken to trying to quell the uprising by reminding everyone of James' tender age. Both sides have their points, but in the end its James' age that may be the best thing going for him and his

Cavaliers team. There is enough experience under the belt that he and his teammates are no longer in awe by the intensity of the playoffs. But there also is enough youth and naiveté that they can push themselves to enter new realms.

If winning a NBA championship process, there is no question that the Cavs are on the right path. They may not be able to get over the hump and into the finals this year, but they are a team, if not the team, on the come. And if that's too much to ask of a 22-year old, just remember this: next year James will be 23.