In Gary Benz's latest effort, he takes a look back at the Cavs run to the Finals and admits it was hard to see this coming. Like the Indians pennant in 1995 or the Buckeyes National Championship in 2002, the Cavs victory over the Pistons represents both a historical footing and a context for all that comes next. Hopefully what's next is a victory celebration on Public Square in about two weeks.

At least the Spurs don't represent the state of Florida. Otherwise Cleveland fans would have one more paranoid thought on their minds as they ready themselves for the Cavaliers first appearance ever in the NBA Finals later this week.

For most Cleveland area sports fans, this is really the third crack they have at national glory in just the last year. The Ohio State Buckeyes went to the National Championship games in both football and basketball this past season, only to fall short to the Florida Gators. Indeed, the last Cleveland professional sports team to play for the championship was the Indians who lost to, who else?, the *Florida* Marlins when Jose Mesa melted down in Game 7. But the Cavaliers are facing the Spurs, who reside in San Antonio, and thus from that perspective alone one has to like their chances for getting a local team over the hump.

With the first game still several days away, there will be plenty of time for analysis. But one thing is probably for certain, it's unlikely that Tim Duncan, Tony Parker,

or Manu Ginobili will melt down like the Pistons Rasheed Wallace did several times against the Cavaliers. In fact, it's fair to say that it was Wallace's raging frustration, as much as anything else, which cost the Pistons their chance to return to the NBA Finals and an opportunity to claim their fourth NBA title.

But feel not sorry for the Pistons and the aging, toothless loudmouths they literally transformed into over the course of the last week. The Pistons found themselves up two after the first two games of the series and displaying the kind of false swagger that comes with failing to acknowledge that in each game they were nonetheless outplayed. After each loss, with the roar getting louder and the on-coming rush taking form, Pistons guard Chauncey Billups sounded like Kevin Bacon's character in "Animal House," telling Pistons fans to essentially remain calm and that all was well.

But anyone watching this series knew that this was an act. At every key turn, it was the Cavaliers, not the much more experienced Pistons, which remained calm, repeatedly finding a way to finish what they had started. The Pistons, on the other hand, seemed to take their cue from Wallace and as he panicked as the series deepened, so too did the Pistons. In Saturday night's fourth quarter, the house finally collapsed on Wallace and the rest of his team and thus, as Sunday morning dawned, a new pecking order had clearly emerged in the NBA's Eastern Conference.

In many ways, this series was actually won over a year ago. When the Cavaliers advanced to the conference semifinals last year, they were given no chance whatsoever against the Pistons and indeed a 27-point loss in the first game seemed to confirm those predictions. But then as now, the Cavaliers found a way to survive, inflicting enough body blows on the way to a Game 7 loss to take the fight out of the Pistons in their match-up with Miami. It was those same body blows, however, that never did sufficiently heal and with the Cavs constantly pounding at their kidneys throughout this series, the Pistons never found their sea legs. As a result the Pistons never did find their rhythm as well, either offensively or defensively, and when the final horn sounded Saturday night, the Pistons knew that this was not just another loss but the end of an era that was never fully realized in the first place.

Because LeBron James is, well, LeBron James, he will always be the focus of this team. But for whatever rarified accomplishments James might achieve next, it's still a team game and there is simply no way to get to the finals in any sport without having enough supporting players around you to make a difference. That, in the end, is what really cost the Pistons this series. Their bench was horrible, to put it charitably. Other than Jason Maxiell's performance in Game 2, Pistons fans would have a hard time finding any Pistons reserve that made a meaningful contribution in this series.

The Cavs, on the other hand, got significant minutes, as they usually do, from Anderson Varajeo. But he was hardly alone. With Larry Hughes nursing a sore ankle, Cavs coach Mike Brown was forced to improvise. That led to some meaningful minutes for Damon Jones who played better defense in the limited time he had in this series then he's ever played while in a Cavs uniform. But the biggest assist of all goes to the youngest player on the court, Daniel "Boobie" Gibson. Looking like he should be attending his Senior Prom rather than playing in the NBA's Eastern Conference Finals, Gibson made the Pistons pay dearly for their one-note defensive scheme in Game 6 that seem designed solely to keep James from again lighting up the scoreboard. James repeatedly found a wide-open Gibson who calmly knocked down five three-pointers on his way to a game high and career high 31 points.

Perhaps what is most amazing about the fact that the Cavaliers are headed to the NBA Finals for the first time in franchise history is that it was hard to see this coming. Though the Cavs did win 50 games this season, it often seemed like a struggle. At no point did they find, let alone maintain, the kind of consistency they have found in the playoffs. In fact, when owner Dan Gilbert told reporters at halftime of the final regular season game that it was important for the Cavs to take another step in their growth by reaching the Eastern Conference Finals, no one disagreed but the optimism was hardly universal that this growth would actually be achieved this year.

But James never has followed the more typical path, which this year would have been a good showing in the Eastern Conference Finals. Like he's been doing since junior high school, by force of will he literally accelerated his personal

growth and that of the team as a whole during the Pistons series, not allowing either himself or his teammates to be satisfied with just showing up. With his performances, particularly beginning with Game 3, James seemed to say, if we have to play, we might as well win and his teammates followed suit. It's a mentality that will serve them well when they take on a vastly more experienced team in the Spurs in the Finals.

But again, there is plenty of time between now and Thursday to analyze the Spurs series in mind-numbing detail. Today is for the long-suffering fans of Cleveland sports, one of whom is James himself, to relish. Like the Indians pennant in 1995 or the Buckeyes National Championship in 2002, the Cavs victory over the Pistons represents both a historical footing and a context for all that comes next. Hopefully what's next is a victory celebration on Public Square in about two weeks.