If you want to be the Man, you need to beat the Man. On Thursday Night, not far from the Mexican border, your 2007 Eastern Conference Champion Cleveland Cavaliers (that looks great in print) will play the Man. In Jesse Lamovsky's latest, he says that the Spurs have been the model of excellence in the NBA, and are the team the Cavs are trying to emulate. To play them in the NBA Finals is as great a challenge and as great an opportunity as a team, and its franchise player, can ask for.

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Since the beginning of the Tim Duncan era in 1997, the San Antonio Spurs have a .709 winning percentage and haven't won fewer than 53 games in a non-lockout season- ten total. (The Cavaliers have five 50-win seasons since they entered the league.) Needless to say, they've made the playoffs every one of those years, and once they get in, they tend to stick around for a while- Duncan's Spurs have only been knocked out in the first round once, and that was back in 2000 (the year of their lowly 53-29 record). Since '97, San Antonio has won six Midwest and Southwest Division titles (The Cavaliers haven't won a division title since their lone Central crown in 1976) and is a combined 6-1 in conference finals and NBA championship series. They are a perfect 3-0 in the Finals. In the last nine seasons, the Spurs have played in more conference finals (five) than the Cavaliers have played in their history (three).

San Antonio's run of excellence goes all the way back to the start of David Robinson's career, when the franchise still played in the old HemisFair Arena. Since 1989-90, the Admiral's rookie year, the Spurs have had one losing season- 1996-97, when they plunged from 59 wins to 20 thanks to injuries that wiped out virtually all of Robinson's season and most of Sean Elliott's, and thanks maybe a little bit of tanking as well. All the unpleasant interlude did was put the Spurs in line to draft Tim Duncan, and with a healthy Robinson and the Big Fundamental in the fold, they zipped right back to 56 wins in 1997-98. Powered by Duncan and guided by the stern-if-pockmarked visage of Gregg Popovich, they've lived in the elite ever since.

In 2002-03, while John Lucas's "Cadavers" rode Ricky Davis, DeJuan Wagner, Jumaine Jones, and Darius Miles to a league-worst 17-65 record, the Spurs went a league-best 60-22 and won their second NBA championship in five years, with Tim Duncan all but single-handedly destroying the Nets in the Finals. John Lucas had once coached in San Antonio. That was pretty much the only thing the two organizations had in common in those days.

Those days are over. And while the Spurs are back in the Finals, the Cavaliers have risen from the NBA's Siberia to rulers of the East in much the same way the Spurs lifted themselves out of their own doldrums in the ‘80s, and again in the ‘90s- by winning the draft lottery, selecting a franchise player, then building a team around him. Danny Ferry came from San Antonio, where he is known for being a simple role player on a championship club, not a ten-year, 34-million dollar albatross. Mike Brown came from San Antonio by way of Indiana, and he brought with him assistant Hank Egan, the mastermind of the defensive schemes that have helped carry both teams into the Finals.

If there's a franchise out there to emulate, it's San Antonio. The Spurs aren't the most dominant team in the NBA over the last decade- that would be the 2000-02 Lakers, who twice wiped out Duncan and the boys in the playoffs by a combined margin of eight games to one. But in terms of consistent excellence, of being a championship contender year-in, year-out, the Spurs the Association's blue-chip concern. And that's why they're not only the ideal role model for the Cavaliers- they're also the ideal opponent in a young team's first NBA Finals. A match-up

with the Spurs means something. This is the team you want to play, whose star you want to match. Never mind the "boring" label- right now San Antonio is the glamour franchise of the NBA. No one else is even close.

To become the premier team in the Eastern Conference, the Cavaliers had to go through Detroit. To become the premier team in the sport, they have to go through San Antonio. The East has won two Finals this decade, and both are to a certain extent tainted: Detroit's "five-game sweep" of Los Angeles in '04 came at the expense of a Lakers team in an obvious fall-of-Rome state, and Miami's title last year was a whistle-fest brought about by Dwayne Wade working in tandem with the officials and a callow Mavericks team that became as neurotic as its owner when the going got tough. The Spurs, no matter what you think of the late unpleasantness of the Phoenix series, are untainted. To play them in the NBA Finals is as great a challenge and as great an opportunity as a team, and its franchise player, can ask for.