Are the Boston Celtics all of the sudden a force to be reckon with in the East with the additions of Ray Allen and Kevin Garnett? This was the debate waged by TCF writers Erik Cassano and Joel Hammond, and captured here on our front page. Erik feels the Celtics mortgaged the future and can not win with this group. Joel is ready to pencil 'em in the Finals, and are a serious roadblock for a second straight Cavs Eastern Conference title.

HAMMOND: As I wrote on my blog for Cleveland Business on Tuesday afternoon, I'm among the many who think the Boston Celtics just leapt far ahead of the pack in the NBA's Eastern Conference with their trade for Kevin Garnett.

Fellow TCF writer Erik Cassano, nearly instantly after seeing the above entry, e-mailed me in disagreement. And here we are, doing what we once did best in college at Bowling Green: An old-fashioned slobberknocker. Erik will tell you why the Cavs are in no worse shape than they were when Garnett resided in the Twin Cities. I'll tell you why he's wrong, mainly because Garnett and fellow new Celtic Ray Allen provide Paul Pierce with everything LeBron James needs: A consistent scoring threat able to draw double teams - and beat the opposition when he's the one drawing them.

Look around the East: Chicago re-signed Andres Nocioni, one of the key contributors in a team that got smoked by the Pistons in the East semis. The Pistons re-signed Chauncey Billups, who missed many a big shot in the East finals against the Cavs, and Antonio McDyess, whose forearm shiver to Anderson Varejao's head may have cost Detroit a game in that series. Think Boston's old? Look at Miami. Shaq is awful. Ditto for Antoine Walker. The Cavs still have glaring issues on its bench and at point guard.

Not exactly inspiring work, eh?
Look farther down: Is Rashard Lewis the answer for the Magic? Can Yi - if he ever reports - propel the Bucks? Will Zach Randolph and Eddy Curry push the Knicks over the top?
No. No. No.
Erik can't convince me the Celtics won't be able to run away with the East - as presently constituted, I must add - but here's where he'll try.

CASSANO: Joel, what I think is going on here -- not just with you, but with every writer and broadcaster who has opined on the oncoming return to greatness for the Celtics -- is a classic case of shock-and-awe. You all see a big name like Garnett change hands in a blockbuster trade, and suddenly think Garnett's new team is going to be a beast simply because the magnitude of the trade is so large. Wasn't everyone salivating over Ben Wallace in much the same way when the Bulls signed him last summer? Wasn't he supposed to be Chicago 's "missing piece"?

My case against Garnett centers on three things: One, the Celtics were horrible with a capital "H" this past season. I don't care who they trade for or sign, teams that go 24-58 one year don't suddenly morph into 55-to-60 game winning conference champions in one year. Two, if Garnett is that much of a difference-maker, why didn't Minnesota ever become the cream of the crop in the West in all the years Garnett was there? My guess is that Garnett's arrival on a team doesn't instantly equal a 35-game swing in the standings. And I've heard the "Allen and Pierce are better than any help Garnett ever had in Minnesota" argument. Probably true, but not by a large enough margin to take over the East in one season. This is not a reunification of Jordan, Pippen and Rodman. Not by a long shot.
Three, what is the rest of the East, chopped liver? I know the East is by far the weaker of the two conferences in the NBA, but if LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Shaquille O'Neal couldn't conquer the conference simply by pulling on the uniform of a conference team, Garnett sure as heck won't be able to.
Garnett is not a bigger star than LeBron, Shaq or Wade. He's in that league, but by saying Garnett's arrival makes the Celtics arguably the best team in the East, you're basically saying that Garnett is more of a difference-maker than anyone listed above. And I just don't see that. Otherwise, The Timberwolves would have a couple of trophies and a happy Garnett right now instead of a bunch of Celtics cast-offs and draft picks.

HAMMOND : Erik, You're right on a number of points. It was a case of shock-and-awe for me, watching the Cavs' inept offense last season. I was shocked any offense could be that bad. You could say I was in awe of its badness. Also, you hit the nail on the head in regard to the Celtics' terrible season. But in case you missed it, THEY WERE TANKING GAMES at the end of the season. And oh, by the way, Pierce played 47 games. What happens if LeBron James plays in 47 games? I shudder at the thought. You're also right about one player being unable to run through the East - no matter how bad it is - by himself. If it was Garnett, Rajon Rondo, Brian Scalabrine, Kendrick Perkins, me, you and Rich Swerbinsky, I'd be concerned. If it was LeBron and that crew, I'd be concerned. If it was Jordan and that crew, I'd be concerned.
But it ain't. Garnett can't do it by himself, as he showed in Minnesota (you're right again!). I never said he could. Luckily, he's got two sidekicks to help him along the way. And let me refresh your memory: Remember when he had two legit sidekicks, Sam Cassell and Latrell Sprewell? The Timberwolves went as far as they'd ever gone, to the Western Finals where they lost to a loaded Lakers team.
Where you're wrong: Comparing Garnett to Ben Wallace. Really? Ben freaking Wallace? The most one-dimensional player in the league? I think you'd be hard-pressed to find me saying Wallace would put the Bulls over the top. And, whaddya know, they drafted Joakim Noah, a skinnier, just-as-ridiculously-haired form of Wallace. Yeah, that'll help.
I'm not in the make-a-blockbuster-for-the-heck-of-it camp, and the Cavs don't necessarily need a blockbuster trade. But, I bet if you opened a thread on a TCF or a Celtics message board, and asked fans if they'd sacrifice salary cap inflexibility (which the Cavs already possess, coincidentally) for a legitimate run at unseating the Spurs, I bet you'd have a helluva lot of fans telling you pull the trigger on the trade that does that for you.

CASSANO: I wasn't comparing Wallace to Garnett, Joel. Obviously, the only thing they have in common is playing in the frontcourt. I was merely likening the hullabaloo surrounding Wallace signing with the Bulls last summer to the buzz surrounding the Garnett trade. And didn't the Wallace signing prompt a lot of people to christen the Bulls the favorites in the East, as they are doing with the Celtics now? As I said, in both cases it's an overreaction to a high-profile player switching teams. You can tell me the Celtics were tanking games at the end of last season and I have no problem believing that is true. But why were they tanking games? Because they were a pitiful team with no present or future. Now Danny Ainge hangs his entire offseason on acquiring Ray

Allen and Kevin Garnett? That's not shrewd dealing by a master GM, that's the mark of a desperate basketball executive who needs to show progress right now, or face losing his job.

You can criticize anything Danny Ferry has done as the Cavs GM, and the Cavs certainly have their share of issues. But nobody -- not you, not anybody -- had better stand here and tell me that Ainge is proving himself a better GM than Ferry because he is making gutsy moves while Ferry does nothing. Ainge isn't bold, he's desperate. Ferry, on the other hand, can bide his time and wait for the right opportunity. He's the one with back-to-back 50-win seasons and a Finals berth, not Ainge. Yet Ainge gets showered with praise for acquiring Garnett while Ferry gets a heaping spoonful of criticism for showing patience and waiting for the dust to clear.

HAMMOND : I'd hope that you know me to be better than one of the TCF knee-jerk message-board posters, proclaiming the Celtics the greatest since Kareem, Magic and Worthy. I'm puzzled as to why you keep bringing up people bashing Danny Ferry; I get the impression you and him have a gentlemen's agreement that says you must defend him at all times. I haven't bashed Ferry; actually, I gave him the benefit of the doubt in the blog I linked to in my opening salvo: "Ferry may still make an impact, but maintaining the status quo won't be nearly enough to keep pace with new-look Boston. ... Ferry may still have an ace (sic) up the hole, a la the Gooden deal. The Celtics, and the rest of the East, are salivating at the thought that he doesn't."
And there's the rub.

Call Ainge desperate, a poor GM, whatever you'd like. He's certainly struggled. But I'll call him the winner of this offseason. Aside from Jefferson, who in the group the Celtics gave up is going to be worth a flying fig in the NBA? The Cavs got to the Finals this summer. But were they legit title contenders? To end my part of this chat, I'll ask another form of the question I posed in my last turn: Would you have traded Gooden, Pavlovic, Gibson and a draft pick (I know that wouldn't really work money-wise, but work with me) for a shot to be LEGITIMATE contenders for the next three years?
Gooden, Pavlovic, Gibson and a pick for Kevin Garnett.
I would have, and I bet I'm not in the minority.

CASSANO: I bring up Ferry because isn't that what this is really all about? Why would a couple of Cavs fans give a rip as to what the Boston Celtics do during the

offseason unless we're comparing it to what the Cavs have or haven't done? For someone who routinely attacks the "Only In Cleveland" inferiority/griping complex that so many fans carry, I'm surprised you have an issue with my defending Ferry. As you pointed out, even you are giving Ferry the benefit of the doubt. My volley was pre-emptive in nature.
The Cavs weren't legit title contenders this year. I don't think any team in the East would have been. Not against the Spurs, who went on one of the greatest postseason runs in recent NBA history. With that in mind, would I have loved to see Garnett on the Cavs? Sure. Do I think Garnett could have been the piece that put the Cavs over the top to becoming a title contender? Absolutely. But that's because the Cavs have LeBron James and experience in the Finals to build on. The Celtics have nothing like that, yet you and a horde of national writers are treating them like they're pure gold, even though they've proven positively zilch.

In summary, the gist of my argument is that I think the Celtics should be met with the same skepticism that seems to follow the Cavs wherever they go. It doesn't seem to matter that the Cavs have won 100 regular season games in two years, that they upset Detroit once in the playoffs and came within a rebound of having done it twice. It doesn't seem to matter that they reached the NBA Finals. All we ever hear about is how they're burdened with horrible contracts, how they were the worst team to ever reach the Finals, how Ferry is screwing the team up for decades to come and how LeBron is going to run screaming out of Cleveland in 2010. Yet all the Cavs do is keep winning. The Celtics, by contrast, have proven nothing except that they had some crappy expiring contracts, one young potential star to trade and a desperate GM, and managed to turn it into Kevin Garnett. And now, they're the best team in the East without playing a dribble of basketball together? If that's true, the Eastern Conference should be disbanded or merged with the USBL, because that says much more about the 14 other teams in the conference than it does about the Celtics, Ainge or Garnett.