The Cavaliers begin their defense of the Eastern Conference tonight with many questions, concerns, and moving parts. But according to Nick Allburn, none are bigger than the play of Larry Hughes. Hughes contract is a big part of the reason the team has had two quiet off-seasons in a row. And his questionable shot selection and poor shooting percentage has been a hindrance to the teams offense. Nick talks Larry and talks Cavs basketball on opening day.

The Cleveland Cavaliers enter the ‘07-'08 season with numerous moving parts. After their magical run to the Finals ended with a grievous sweep, it became clear that the Cavs would not reach the precipice without some roster overhaul, and perhaps some changes in coaching philosophy, as well.

But summer came and went without the Cavaliers making so much as a ripple in the NBA"s free agent pool. In late September, the Cavaliers made their only significant roster changes of the offseason by adding two former New Orleans Hornets; one, Cedric Simmons, in exchange for bench-warming guard David Wesley, and one, Devin Brown, via free agency.

The Cavs have endured the delusional holdouts of both Sasha Pavlovic and Anderson Varejao, with Varejao's situation still unresolved.

Cleveland's preseason struggles have been well documented, as Daniel Gibson has struggled to adapt to the role of starting point guard, and Mike Brown has once again revamped the Cavs' underachieving offense. Add in LeBron's Cap Controversy, coupled with GM Danny Ferry's inability to move overpaid, mediocre veterans like Donyell Marshall and Damon Jones, and it becomes painfully obvious why Forest City natives have grown restless.

But Cleveland's utmost concern doesn't lie with Daniel Gibson, unmade trades, or a baseball cap. Instead, it's a lanky two guard named Larry Hughes.

Rewind to summer 2005. The Cavaliers have missed the playoffs with their second consecutive late-season collapse. LeBron James' future in Cleveland is, in the opinion of some, very much in doubt. Dan Gilbert is viewed as a meddling idiot of an owner. After firing Jim Paxson, Gilbert hires Mike Brown without the aid of a general manager.

In late June, Danny Ferry is hired to replace Paxson as general manager. Ferry's first order of business is spending the $28 million of cap space that Paxson left behind.

The four key contracts of summer 2005:

- Zydrunas Ilgauskas, 5 years, $50 million
- Larry Hughes, 5 years, $65 million
- Donyell Marshall, 4 years, $22 million
- Damon Jones, 4 years, $16 million

2005 was recognized as a defining year for the Cavs, at least in regards to shaping the roster. Unfortunately, that's not the ideal situation for a rookie GM. Of the four contracts Ferry negotiated that summer, the only signing that can't be viewed as a bust is Ilgauskas', which has been a marginal success.

Obviously, Ferry felt substantial pressure to surround LeBron James with complimentary players or die trying. Even with said pressure, to say that Ferry

was overly aggressive and a bit too liberal with his spending is a perfectly legitimate claim.

Prior to signing Hughes, the Cavs were spurned by Ray Allen and Michael Redd, primarily due to the NBA's salary rules, which allow teams to offer their stars significantly more lucrative contracts than opposing teams.

Either Allen or Redd, each with scoring potential and three-point proficiency, would have made a fine partner for LeBron James. But with his options limited, Danny Ferry signed Larry Hughes to be the Robin to LeBron's Batman.

Whether or not Ferry had any reservations about giving Hughes premium dollars is mere conjecture, but there were significant red flags regarding Hughes that, consciously or not, were ignored. For better or worse, Ferry rolled the dice of Hughes.

Hughes came with a high risk of injury. Before joining the Cavaliers, Hughes had missed 212 games in eight seasons; 26.5 games per year. With Cleveland, Hughes has kept pace, missing 48 games in two years, freakishly similar to his pre-Cleveland numbers.

Leapin' Larry's shooting deficiencies shouldn't have come as a shock, either. In eight seasons pre-Cleveland, Hughes shot better than 45 percent from the field only once, while shooting under 40 percent three times. Low and behold, Hughes has continued his inefficiency in C-Town, posting field goal percentages of 40.9 and 40 percent in two seasons, respectively.

Given Hughes' lousy shooting percentage, it's terribly vexing that only one player on the team, LeBron James, shoots more often. That means Hughes is shooting more than post options Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Drew Gooden, who both boast shooting percentages in the upper 40's. With Daniel Gibson, another quality

scorer, now starting at point guard, Hughes should be nothing more than the fourth or fifth option.

The icing on the cake was supposed to be Hughes' much-ballyhooed defense. In ‘‘04-'05 with Washington, Hughes was named to the first team NBA All-Defensive Team after leading the league in steals. However, much of Hughes'' success was due to cheating away from his defensive assignment to create turnovers, inflating his stats, and often hurting the team.

It's easy to be angry about how Hughes' contract has hamstrung the Cavaliers financially. That said, Ferry, not Hughes, is to blame for overlooking Hughes'' copious deficiencies and for offering Hughes such an exorbitant contract.

The most frustrating thing about Larry Hughes is that he's immensely talented. Hughes is one of the more physically gifted players in the league. Larry Hughes' biggest problem (besides injuries, of course) is his decision-making.

Too often, Hughes settles for deep twos and other low-percentage shots. Last postseason, the rims of Quicken Loans Arena should have filed assault and battery charges against Hughes.

Honestly, as an opposing coach, I wouldn't even bother guarding Hughes. If it was me, I'd double up on LeBron and let Hughes fire away on anything 15 feet or deeper. Although lacking a prototypical point guard is worrisome, the biggest problem with Cavs' offense is that Larry Hughes thinks he's Steve Kerr.

Much of the Cavs' success this season will be dictated by whether or not Hughes wants to play smart basketball. If Larry decides to play within the offense, improves his shot selection, and makes a concerted effort to drive the basketball, we will see improvement.

But if Hughes remains the Cavs' resident chucker who short-circuits possessions with lazy jumpers, the offense will once again consist of waiting around for King James to assert his will. In an improved Eastern Conference, simply playing good defense and LeBron-watching won't get the job done.