In a lot of ways, it was the worst thing that could have happened. A seventh-game playoff loss to a team from Boston for the second time in eight months. Fans are angry. LeBron, in no uncertain terms, and with two years left on his contract here, made his thoughts clear to Danny Ferry and Dan Gilbert by saying "we need to get better". In his latest column, Erik Cassano looks back on the Boston series. And ahead to the most important offseason in the 38 year history of the Cavaliers franchise.

In a lot of ways, it was the worst thing that could have happened. A seventh-game playoff loss to a team from Boston for the second time in eight months.

Somewhat understandably, nerves around Northeast Ohio were raw on Monday morning, following the Cavaliers' 97-92 season-ending loss to the Celtics. Radio shows were peppered with calls from fans who want to lump the 2007-08 Cavs in with the '07 Indians on the long list of jokers and chokers that have marked the past 40-plus years of Cleveland's sports history.

Part of it's the Boston factor. Maybe we resent the praise lavished on Boston sports by the likes of ESPN, the widely-dispensed opinion that the whole country - Cleveland included -- should somehow be happy for the Red Sox and their faithful for enduring 86 years without a World Series title, then winning two in the span of four years while we've endured 43 years and counting without a title in any major pro sport.

Maybe we resent how Bill Belichick did more than his part to alienate the Browns from their fans in the early ‘90s, helping to pave the way for Modell's move, then turned around and used his considerable coaching prowess (and maybe some

film?) to drop three Super Bowl titles and a perfect regular season into Bostonians' laps. Maybe we're still smacking our heads in disbelief as to how the Celtics could go from inept and rudderless to NBA title favorites in one year, while the Cavs took a step backward despite employing not-so-arguably the greatest player on the planet.

Whatever it is, Cleveland fans hate losing to Boston with a capital "H". Unfortunately, this Cavs team probably couldn't have done any better than they did against the Celtics. They used their defense to stay competitive in three of four road games. They used defense and clutch scoring to win three home games, all despite having a roster that was noticeably less talented than that of their New England opponents.

Unlike the '07 Tribe, which had an honest-to-goodness psychological meltdown in the final three games of last year's ALCS, there really was no choke for the Cavs. Sure, you can nitpick their play late in the fourth quarters of Games 1, 5 and 7, mining each possession for evidence of the "C" word, and I'm sure you'd find some. Any team that loses a game lost, in part, because the players didn't make all the plays they needed to make.

But if you take a look at the rosters of both teams, you should realize it's a small miracle the Cavs were able to muster enough pluck to push the Celtics to Game 7, and keep all of Boston sweating until the final minute of that game.

Late in the series, when playoff-tested veterans are supposed to draw from their reservoir of intestinal fortitude and wear their playoff experience like a suit of armor, LeBron wasn't getting a lot of help. Wally Szczerbiak, the man who passes for a second scoring option, was treating the rim like a percussion instrument. Ben Wallace, Anderson Varejao and Joe Smith weren't bringing much besides the oft-repeated "intangibles that don't show up on the stat sheet." Zydrunas Ilgauskas laid a Game 7 egg. Delonte West was the best of the bunch surrounding LeBron, and he's the least-experience of them all at postseason play.

That's the perfect segue into my first point:

1. There is no way around it: The Cavs need better players.

Before you demand that Danny Ferry force Mike Brown to hire an assistant to handle the offensive playbook, recognize the fact that a coach is only going to be as good as the raw materials he has to work with. Offensively, Brown has one of the most dynamic offensive players in the game in LeBron. Other than that, he has a handful of guys who are proficient in a limited area (Z, West and Gibson) and beyond that, the aging, the overhyped and the underproductive.

This team lacks, in no particular order: an offense-initiating point guard, a shooting guard who can attack and shoot to the tune of 20 points per game and a 20-point, 10-rebound power forward.

Ferry won't be able to address all three needs in one offseason, so he has to take careful stock of what he has. Maybe West can hold down the point guard spot and develop, even if he's not the elite point guard everyone wants. Maybe a tag-team of Wallace, Smith and Varejao can provide enough defense that 20 and 10 isn't necessary out of the power forward spot.

Job 1 in my book is finding a shooting, penetrating running mate for LeBron. The Celtics showed how advantageous it can be to have a trio of top scorers. Ray Allen was basically a non-factor against the Cavs. Kevin Garnett was solid, but didn't have a series for the ages. The real Cav killer was Paul Pierce, who came up big in Games 5 and 7.

The Cavs desperately need a shooting guard who other teams have to worry about stopping apart from LeBron. Not only could such a player help take defensive heat off LeBron when he's on the floor, he could serve as a go-to guy when LeBron is taking a rest. Bonus points if he's a good passer and can play

pitch-and-catch with LeBron.

But if the Cavs can't get their hands on someone like Michael Redd, Tracy McGrady or the like, they have to do something to get that second elite scorer. If they don't, more teams in the East will pass them in the pecking order, and LeBron will have more games like Sunday, where he plays his rear end off, and it still isn't enough. Want to convince LeBron that the Cavs aren't where it's at? Keep letting him have 45-point games that end up in the loss column because he has no help.

2. Of course, Mike Brown has culpability, too.

It's not the fact that Mike Brown isn't a creative offensive visionary. That's not what peeves me. Plenty of coaches have succeeded in the NBA without Picasso paintbrush skills when it comes to the offensive playbook. It's that Brown seems to treat every offensive adjustment like a roll of the dice.

Offensive adjustments seem to occur willy-nilly, with little form, rhyme or reason to back them up. Once the experimenting is over, the offense usually reverts back to LeBron, at the top of the key in isolation, dribbling down the shot clock, looking for a seam to the basket. If one doesn't develop, say hello to LeBron's little friend, the 22-foot fall-away.

Whether Brown is made to bring in an offensive coordinator or not, the fact remains that he has to make a commitment to an offensive system. Not just a set of plays, but a philosophy, an offensive identity.

A team that makes defense its calling card can still have an offensive identity. They aren't mutually exclusive. I sometimes wonder if Brown thinks that if you're not aspiring to the model of the Detroit Pistons or the San Antonio Spurs, you must be aspiring to become the Phoenix Suns. So he treads lightly around

offense lest he do anything to damage his team's defensive focus.

The trouble is, meat grinder basketball is really tough to play for 82 games. To win consistently, the Cavs have to rely almost solely on playoff-level defensive intensity. When they play defense at that kind of level, they can beat just about anyone. But it's unrealistic to ask a team to perform that kind of foot-shuffling, crisp-rotating, arm-waving, shot-contesting defense every game for more than five months, THEN do it throughout the playoffs.

On the second night of back to backs, on the fourth game in five nights, at the end of that six-game West Coast jaunt in January, it's nice to know that you can outscore the L.A. Clippers when Big Ben's back is aching, Andy has another ankle sprain, Z whacked his head on a door frame and LeBron caught the flu from one of his kids.

Mike Brown's defense definitely helps the Cavs win playoff games. But his lack of a workable offense is losing them games in the regular season.

3. LeBron is watching to see what happens.

Summer of '06, no notable moves to improve the team. Summer of '07, no notable moves to improve the team. LeBron started to get impatient with the lack of wheeling and dealing by Ferry last summer, but he still played along because he knew the contract bind Ferry was in.

But then Ferry pulled off February's trade-deadline blockbuster, proving that even the most undesirable of contracts can be moved to the right buyer. And like everybody else who hasn't been living under a rock, LeBron knows Ferry has about $30 million in expiring deals to work with this summer. Then, following Sunday's elimination loss, LeBron made one of the few public comments he's ever made about the need to improve the roster.

In short, this is a critical summer for LeBron's relationship with the Cavs. LeBron does not want to tread water while the rest of the Eastern Conference improves over yet another offseason, and he'll make sure Ferry and Dan Gilbert know that, either through direct communication or not-so-subtle hint-dropping:

LBJ, iPod buds stuck in his ears: "Start spreading the news/I'm leaving today/I want to be a part of it/New York, New York!"

Ferry: "Cool, 'Bron! I didn't know you liked Sinatra!"

LBJ: "I don't."

With Tuesday's news that the division rival Bulls secured the first overall pick in next month's draft, it only increases the sense of urgency that the Cavs have to do something big this offseason to prove to LeBron that they're as focused on winning a title as he is.

With LeBron's potential free agency a mere 26 months away, motivation shouldn't be a problem in the Cavs' front office.

And finally....

4. This all follows a logical path.

NBA offseason dealings are a complex mass of salary figures, cap space numbers, contract clauses and who knows what else. But boiled down to its basic elements, Ferry already has his path for success laid out for him:

Expiring contracts = trades = more talent = more wins next regular season = higher playoff seed = homecourt advantage = better chance that you'll penetrate deep into the playoffs = legitimate shot at an NBA title.

Ferry makes the big bucks to coordinate scouting, crunch the numbers and find the deals that make the most sense from both a basketball and a financial standpoint, so I'll leave the fine print to him. But the ultimate process and goal is Basketball 101. More talent equals more wins equals better shot at a title.

Sounds simple enough, right? Let's get to work on it.