Back before Mark Wahlberg was Marky Mark, when Bobby McFerrin was not worrying and being happy, there was one Soviet Union and two Germanys and ABC dominated Tuesday nights with "The Wonder Years" and "Roseanne," another Cavaliers team got off to a start that had the town and the NBA talking. In the winter of 1988-89, the Cavs, boasting a brilliant young core of players, turned Northeast Ohio on its ear with a 24-5 start, the best in franchise history to that point and beyond. Jesse Lamovsky chronicles another great start from another great Cavalier team.

Back *before* Mark Wahlberg was Marky Mark, when Bobby McFerrin was not worrying and being happy, there was one Soviet Union and two Germanys and ABC dominated Tuesday nights with "The Wonder Years" and "Roseanne," another Cavaliers team got off to a start that had the town and the NBA talking. In the winter of 1988-89, the Cavs, boasting a brilliant young core of players, turned Northeast Ohio on its ear with a 24-5 start, the best in franchise history to that point and beyond. Twenty years later, the Cavaliers, now led by one transcendent superstar and abetted by a cast of solid role players, are duplicating the feats of that long-ago team that once called the Richfield Coliseum, now an empty meadow alongside a useless freeway interchange, home.

Those were the days. Let's talk about that team and that start.

Expectations were rather modest going for the Cavaliers going into the 1988-89 season. Cleveland was one of the league's youngest teams: Mark Price, Brad

Daugherty and Ron Harper were all under 25, and the only two men on the roster over the age of thirty were Phil Hubbard and Tree Rollins, neither of whom played very much. The NBA has always been a veterans' league, and aside from 29-year old Larry Nance, acquired from the Suns late in the '87-88 season, the Cavs had precious few veterans as key contributors. The previous season, the Cavs had gotten hot late and finished two games over .500 at 42-40, the franchise's first winning record in a decade. This was not a team accustomed to success.

The state of the Central Division lowered expectations further. The division was a monster: the Bad Boy Pistons were coming off their first trip to the NBA Finals, the Hawks had advanced in the playoffs three straight years with a talent-laden roster led by the great Dominique Wilkins , the Bucks were an accomplished veteran group, and the Bulls had the game's best player in Michael Jordan. Forget about contending for a championship: it was going to be a tall order just to climb into the upper levels of the division- or so most people thought.

So, while the Cavaliers were respected as a team with outstanding young talent, they were seen as a team of tomorrow, not today. The closest comparison in terms of current NBA teams is Portland: precocious, improving, and increasingly dangerous, but not quite ready for prime-time yet. People expected a better record and perhaps a better playoff seed (they'd been the sixth seed in 1988, when they fell to the Bulls in a tough first-round series) but no one expected a leap into the elite, at least not just then. But people were in for a surprise.

Let's go through the 24-5 start , breaking it down into chunks:

Nov 1 @ Charlotte: W 133-93 (1-0)
Nov 5 @ Indiana: W 105-99 (2-0)
Nov 9 vs. L.A. Clippers: W 108-91 (3-0)
Nov 12 vs. Indiana: W 121-96 (4-0)

There's nothing like a warm, fresh batch of cupcakes to get a team off on the right foot. The opener was the first game in franchise history for the Charlotte Hornets, who went on to lose 62 games in their expansion season. Indiana had its own young core of Chuck Person, Reggie Miller and Rik Smits, but it wasn't the mid-90s yet; the Pacers stumbled out to an 11-40 start before Dick Versace, the team's fourth head coach, restored some order and brought them home at 28-54. The Clippers did their usual thing, going 21-61, including a spectacular 32-loss-in-33-game stretch in January and February. The '88 Cavaliers did exactly what the *'08* Cavaliers would have done with such moist, chewy delights: they devoured them.

Nov 15 vs. Atlanta: L 95-97 (4-1)

The Hawks were the first good team the Cavs played, and they lost to them at the Coliseum, as Atlanta survived a cold shooting night from 'Nique and thrived on a 9-of-14 effort from Reggie Theus. The Hawks had a ton of talent back then, and although they were seen as a bit of enigma, never quite the sum of their parts, they always seemed to match up well with Cleveland. This loss might have been a little disconcerting, but then again, nobody expected *that* much out of this Cavs team to begin with.

Nov 18 @ New Jersey: W 95-94 (5-1)
Nov 19 vs. Milwaukee: W 106-99 (6-1)
Nov 22 @ Boston: W 114-102 (Hartford) (7-1)
Nov 23 @ Philadelphia: L 91-104 (7-2)
Nov 26 @ New York: L 112-127 (7-3)
Nov 27 vs. Miami: W 109-80 (8-3)

The Cavaliers then swept their first back-to-back of the season, squeezing past the eventual 56-loss Nets and winning more comfortably over Central Division foe Milwaukee. Back then, teams played each division opponent six times in the regular season. That's a total of 24 games- more than a quarter of the schedule- against 63-win Detroit, 52-win Atlanta, 49-win Milwaukee, and 47-win Chicago,

featuring a certain someone named Michael. Not easy.

After defeating the Bucks, the Cavaliers went east for a three-game road trip. They knocked off the Larry Bird-less Celtics at the Hartford Civic Center and then suffered their first two-game losing streak at the hands of the bruising, Barkley-led 76ers and the Knicks, who were running-and-gunning to the Atlantic Division title under Rick Pitino. The night after losing in Madison Square Garden, the Cavaliers came home to their first-ever game against the expansion Heat, who were 0-9 going into the night and 0-10 at the end of it, on their way to a zero-and-17 start. The Cavaliers, their own expansion days long behind them, were 8-3.

Dec 1 @ Milwaukee: W 99-96 (9-3)
Dec 2 vs. Boston: W 112-84 (10-3)
Dec 4 vs. Denver: W 122-103 (11-3)
Dec 6 @ Houston: L 105-106 (11-4)
Dec 8 @ San Antonio: W 104-95 (12-4)
Dec 10 @ Dallas: W 102-98 (13-4)

After squeezing out a road win over Milwaukee behind Ron Harper's 28 points, the Cavaliers came home and made it four in a row by swamping Boston, still without Larry Bird, and Denver, which was 11-4 going into the game but fell victim to a 56-percent Cleveland shooting night. They then came within a bucket of sweeping the Texas Triangle, losing by one in Houston, beating the woeful Spurs (in their last year BDR- before David Robinson) in Hemisfair Arena and toppling a Mavericks team that had been in the West Finals in 1988 but went 38-44 in '88-89, the first leg of their decade-long journey into the NBA wilderness. The Cavaliers were now 13-4, their best start in twelve years, and it was about to get better.

Dec 13 vs. L.A. Lakers: L 102-111 (13-5)
Dec 15 vs. Detroit: W 119-98 (14-5)
Dec 17 vs. Atlanta: W 120-94 (15-5)
Dec 20 vs. Utah: W 110-94 (16-5)

The next homestand featured a lineup of heavyweights: two-time defending NBA Champion Los Angeles, defending East Champion Detroit, Dominique's Hawks, and the Jazz, who had taken the Lakers to seven in the '88 Playoffs and were coming into their own behind the young tandem of John Stockton and Karl Malone. The Cavs fell to L.A. and a Magic triple-double, than routed the Pistons, Hawks, and Jazz in quick succession to take over first place in the Central Division. The thrashings of three of the NBA's elite teams got peoples' attention, and suddenly the Cavs were 16-5 and one of the league's top stories as the calendar swung into the holiday season.

Dec 21 @ Boston: W 115-114 (17-5)
Dec 23 vs. Seattle: W 109-107 (OT) (18-5)
Dec 27 @ Chicago: W 107-96 (19-5)
Dec 28 vs. Charlotte: W 122-98 (20-5)
Dec 30 vs. Washington: W 127-110 (21-5)
Jan 3 vs. Indiana: W 119-98 (22-5)
Jan 5 vs. Chicago: W 103-98 (23-5)
Jan 7 vs. New York: W 104-96 (24-5)

The Cavaliers ran the winning streak to eleven over the next two-and-a-half weeks. Included were thrillers over the Celtics and Sonics, one-sided beatings of the Hornets, Pacers and Bullets, and in what would become a trend, two victories over the Bulls. Cleveland climaxed the streak by defeating the Knicks in a Saturday-afternoon showdown between division leaders. The Cavaliers blocked a then-NBA record 21 shots in that game, 11 by Larry Nance.

Record at the end of 29 games: 24-5 (15-2 Home, 9-3 Away)

Central Division Standings at the end of play, January 7, 1989

Cleveland: 24-5: --
Detroit: 21-9: 3.5

Atlanta: 21-11: 4.5
Milwaukee: 18-11: 6
Chicago: 16-14: 8.5
Indiana: 8-23: 17

So, why the hot start?

Clearly the 1988-89 Cavaliers were beneficiaries of friendly early scheduling. Cleveland played five more games at home than on the road. Nearly a third of their games were against teams that would lose 54 or more games, and of their seven games against 50-plus win teams, six were at the Coliseum. Of the league's seven 50-plus loss teams, the only one the Cavs didn't play in the first 29 games was the Sacramento Kings. It wasn't quite Georgetown's non-conference slate in the John Thompson era, but it was a nice friendly road for a young team gaining confidence and to their credit, the Cavs took advantage.

The Cavaliers had also experienced a happy lack of injury problems as they sailed through those first 29 games. Good thing too, because after giving up Kevin Johnson, Mark West and Tyrone Corbin to Phoenix to get Larry Nance (and Mike Sanders, whose name should always be surrounded by parentheses), and losing Dell Curry to Charlotte in the expansion draft, the depth was iffy. Cleveland only went about seven deep, with Craig Ehlo and Hot Rod Williams the only major contributors off the bench.

They also benefited from the struggles of their division rivals. Detroit was having early chemistry problems caused primarily by Adrian Dantley, who would be sent to Dallas for Mark Aguirre in February. Atlanta had to deal with Kevin Willis's season-ending broken foot and mercurial play that put Coach Mike Fratello- still sporting the white man's ‘fro- on the hot seat. The Bulls had traded Charles Oakley to the Knicks for Bill Cartwright prior to the season, and not only were they having trouble integrating Cartwright and young Horace Grant into the starting lineup, but His Airness was unhappy with the deal, which deprived him of Oak-Town's services as an on-court bodyguard.

The Cavs tormented the Bulls that entire season. They didn't exactly dominate, just got breaks and bounces, made plays and found ways to win- and they did it all six times they played Chicago in 1988-89. Cleveland even won the season finale at Chicago Stadium when the Cavs were locked into the third seed and resting their starters and the Bulls were playing everyone. Yes, kids, there was one glorious season where the Great MJ was "pwned" by Cleveland. Not counting the playoffs, of course.

The 1988-89 regular season was a major disappointment for Chicago. Everyone expected the Bulls to improve on their '87-88 campaign, when they won 50 games and advanced in the playoffs for the first time in the Jordan era. Instead they struggled, and worse, it looked as if another young team from their own division had zipped right by them in the pecking order. Magic Johnson's anointing of the Cavs as the "Team of the ‘90s" couldn't have been music to the ears of the Bulls and their own youthful core of Jordan (25), Horace Grant (23), and Scottie Pippen (23.) Overcoming the Pistons was a tough enough chore. Now, in addition to the Bad Boys, the Bulls would be contending with another division rival that was set to dominate the league for the *next* decade. At least, that's the way it looked then.

It looked that way then indeed. Once hot, Cleveland stayed hot. The eleven-game winning streak ended in Seattle- always a tough trip- but the Cavaliers continued to build their lead in the division. On March 2, they were 43-12, had won six straight, and owned a five-game lead over Detroit in the Central, with 27 to play. But the seeds of a swoon had already been sewn. On February 28, in the closing moments of Cleveland's 115-99 spanking of the Pistons- their third win of the season over Detroit without a loss- Rick Mahorn formally introduced his elbow to Mark Price's temple, knocking the Cavalier floor leader out of action temporarily and knocking the Cavaliers from their moorings- for keeps.

The last two months saw the Cavaliers come back to earth. Several starters were nursing injuries, and the lack of depth was becoming an issue. The Cavs found themselves in a position of marked men, a grind on a young team unused to that kind of pressure. And now the Pistons were finding their championship swagger. Aguirre had meshed perfectly since coming over from Dallas, the depth and

experience was kicking in, and as the spring leaves blossomed, so did Chuck Daly's brawny crew. In the last two months, while the Cavs were going 14-13, the Pistons went 27-3, including three wins over Cleveland by ever-increasing margins- by six, by twelve, then by sixteen in a last-week statement thrashing. Detroit not only made up those five games in the Central, they wound up winning it going away, by six games.

Third-seeded Cleveland played the sixth-seeded Bulls in the best-of-five first round of the Eastern Conference Playoffs. Cleveland lost Game One at the Coliseum, 95-88, with Price sitting out due to a groin injury. It was the first loss of the season to the Bulls, and it wouldn't be the last. Cleveland won Game Two to even the series, but lost Game Three at Chicago Stadium to go to the brink of elimination. The Cavs seemed to save their season by stealing Game Four in overtime and regaining home-court advantage: MJ helped them out by missing a free throw that would have put Chicago up by three with nine seconds left in regulation. But he got his redemption in the deciding Game Five at the Coliseum on May 7, 1989, ending Cleveland's breakout season with his foul-line jumper at the buzzer.

Jordan's shot permanently altered the balance of power between the two young division rivals. Just a few months later, Ron Harper- perhaps the most explosive wing player the Cavaliers had before LeBron James- was traded to the Clippers for the draft rights to Danny Ferry, an error that would haunt the franchise for years. Chicago went on to become the real Team of the ‘90s, while the Cavaliers, plagued by injuries, poor drafts, and other misfortunes, never fulfilled their early potential. The Bulls would end Cleveland's season three more times, in the 1992 Eastern Conference Finals, the '93 East Semifinals, and the '94 first round, the latter two by sweep. Jordan would hit another series-ending buzzer-beater in the Coliseum, in Game Four in 1993.

In some ways, the first two months of 1988-89 would prove to be a high-water mark for the franchise in that era. Never again would the Cavaliers be ahead of the Bulls, and never again would they control their division for so long in a season. Even with the late slump, Cleveland finished with 57 wins, a club record that has been tied once (by the 1991-92 team) but never eclipsed. The 37 home wins by

that team is also a club record. But that season should have been a prelude, not a climax.

Twenty years later, the hot start is again all the rage in C-Town. And this time, the Cavaliers have the advantages their predecessors lacked. They have a wealth of big-game experience, quality depth (although another big man would be great), and a roster studded with outstanding veteran players. The Central Division isn't the minefield it used to be. And now *they* have the superstar. This time, we have a chance to get the ending right.

Or at any rate, we can be reasonably sure the Cavaliers will still be playing basketball after the first week of May.