This years Cavaliers are one of the most prolific regular season teams in the long history of Cleveland sports. They're not perfect. They have some flaws. But so do the other challengers for the NBA title, none of whom have equalled the Cavs' overall won-loss record after 68 games. If the Cleveland Cavaliers are not the odds-on favorite to capture the Larry O'Brien Trophy, they are most certainly very, very serious contenders. Warts and all. Jerry Roche assesses the Cavs as they head into the final 14 games of the regular season.

Is it my imagination, or can LeBron James do anything he wants, anytime he wants, on any basketball court in the NBA?

At this writing, James and the Cavaliers have a league-best record of 55-13. Without him, what would the team's record be? 35-33? 40-28? Has "The King" really made that much of a difference?

This week's home game against potent Orlando, as much as any game this year, was a clear indication that he has indeed made that much of a difference. Trailing by nine points in the third quarter, LBJ tossed in 14 of the Cavs' next 16 points to thrust them back into the lead. He scored 21 of the team's last 31, including 15 in the deciding fourth quarter and the last five before the final buzzer. Final margin of victory? Four points. ‘Nuff said.

During two thrilling, fourth-quarter, come-from-behind victories on the recent West Coast trip, it seemed that only LeBron's sheer will separated the Cavs from defeat.

His value comes not only from being able to *do* whatever is needed, but in analyzing game situations and recognizing *what* is needed at the time. If it's a drive to the basket, that's what he does. If it's making a three-pointer, that's what he does. If it's guarding the opposition's hottest scorer, that's what he does. If it's grabbing a rebound or stealing a pass, that's what he does.

Lest we forget (and we won't), his ability was put on display for the world to see in the 2007 playoffs against Detroit. He dropped 48 points on the Motor City Kiddies, including 29 of the Cavs' final 30 in Game 5 of the Eastern Conference finals. In case you missed the press coverage following the double-overtime victory, here's how one national writer (not me, unfortunately) described his performance:

"Watching LeBron James do what he did wasn't a spectacular basketball performance. It transcended that. It wasn't even really about athletics. What he did was reach a level of human perfection that is not even considered to exist in the realm of the possible. What he did was legendary, mythical. We weren't watching Bron on the court, we were watching Achilles on the plains outside the walls of Troy. We were watching Michelangelo paint the ceiling. We were watching greatness and perfection that should not exist in the reality of our human condition. It was beyond any reasonable expectation to achieve, beyond even our ability to witness with credibility."

Has any player in NBA history ever been so dominant? Maybe Wilt Chamberlain in an earlier era. Maybe Michael Jordan. Maybe Oscar Robertson. If you stretch your definition of "dominant," maybe Magic Johnson, for a brief period of time. The list is extremely short -- but not even those players could do anything they wanted, anytime they wanted. (Okay, maybe M.J. in his prime.)

Two years ago, the biggest critics of LeBron were Bill Walton and Charles Barkley, both of whom cited his lack of leadership. Well, not only has that changed, it's done a 180. Between LBJ's knowledge of the game and his superior leadership qualities, it's difficult not to suppose that he might even be a better head coach than Mike Brown -- who is one of the leading candidates for NBA Coach of the Year! How ridiculous is that?

There are, however, attendant dangers to a team being so dominated by one man. The biggest drawback coming immediately to mind is the temptation for his teammates to believe that he will bail them out in the fourth quarter -- no matter how badly they play for the first three quarters. How else to explain their poor third-quarter performances, game after game after game?

In the final two minutes of close contests, James simply takes over, especially on offense. The other four players on the court take their positions around the three-point arc and watch him dribble around, or drive, or take a shot, or they wait for him to dish it off for a three-point attempt. There is little to no offensive movement. That's not a recipe for consistent success, but

it's been working with LeBron stirring the pot, at least so far.

Meanwhile -- the proclamations of overzealous Cavs fans aside -- this team has at least three obvious shortcomings to correct in the remaining 15 games, and not even LeBron James can solve them without help from his teammates.

No. 1 - A sieve-like interior defense. Quicker guards are able to blow by our guards, and inside help has been slow to come. Pity poor Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Andy Varejao, who are often faced with defending a two-on-one or three-on-one assault on the basket. Looking to the imminent playoffs, a return to the lineup by the injured Ben Wallace might help, but there is no guarantee that he will be 100 percent that soon.

No. 2 - Lack of bench support against quality opponents. Against Orlando alone, the bench was outscored 16-5. Wally Szczerbiak is injured (at least temporarily). Joe Smith is Joe Smith -- a solid 7-ppg, 3-rpg replacement -- but nothing more. Sasha Pavlovic is unbelievably inconsistent. Boobie Gibson, hobbled by a toe injury, is a total disaster. With playoff rosters now frozen, there is no help on the horizon. The best Coach Brown can hope to do is put at least one scorer (LeBron or Mo Williams) on the court at all times.

No. 3 - Lack of size on the front line, which the Lakers have exposed twice this season, once with the combination of Pau Gasol and Andrew Bynum, and once with Lamar Odom. A possible counter move by Coach Brown -- if and when the Cavs face the Lakers again -- is starting Wallace and Varejao along with Z. But that actually creates more problems than it solves, for where would the team be when Wallace and Varejao need a blow at the same time? Their hopes would be pinned on Joe Smith and J.J. Hickson, which is not where you would want to pin your hopes if you were the Cavs.

All that said, it's difficult not to absolutely love this team -- the most exciting group of professional athletes to don Cleveland uniforms since the 1995 Indians. Yes, the Cavs have some holes. But so do the other challengers for the NBA title, none of whom have equalled the Cavs' overall won-loss record after 68 games. If the Cleveland Cavaliers are not the odds-on favorite to capture the Larry O'Brien Trophy, they are most certainly very, very serious contenders. Warts and all.