The Cavaliers still have an opportunity to get to and win their first NBA championship this season, but they are in a rather sizable hole at the moment and they seem intent on trying to dig their way out when climbing would be much more effective. The reality though is that the Cavs and the Magic have now played 7 games this season and the Magic have won 5. Gary says the Magic simply are a better team. The question he asks, and answers, is why.

To those who counted on the Cleveland Cavaliers marching their way to a NBA title as some sort of inevitable climax to a special season, the series with the Orlando Magic provides an object lesson the cruelty of sports. Nothing is guaranteed, ever. Just because it may be your team's turn doesn't mean it is. Fate plays a part only in your mind.

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Going into this series, everyone expected it to be difficult. The Magic are the one

team in the NBA that give the Cavs real match up problems. That the Cavs find themselves on the verge of having another season end too soon thus doesn't so much surprise as disappoint. Man, does it disappoint.

But while Cavs fans quietly and begrudgingly lick their wounds they can rest assured in one thing: the best player in the NBA plays for them. No matter what the outcome of this NBA season, LeBron James has proven beyond any shadow of any doubt that he is not just the league's MVP but its best player, no disrespect to Kobe Bryant intended.

The only problem for James is that his teammates have not found a way to step up their game the same way he has. Pick anyone from his supporting cast and you can find huge lapses in this series that run counter to the way he played the rest of the season.

Mo Williams, for example, hasn't been awful in the Magic series, but he's not been that missing link that he appeared to be all season. He's played well in spurts and has played with some grit. But he's also been surprisingly off far too often to be completely counted on. Offensively, his field goal percentage is down almost 15 points from his regular season average. Even more dramatic has been the drop-off in his 3 point shooting, where he's hitting only 22% in the Magic series as compared to 43% in the regular season. Even his free throw percentage is suffering. He hit 91% in the regular season and his hitting only 85% in this series.

The same holds true for Delonte West. Both his field goal and three-point shooting are down in the Magic series vs. his regular season. Simply put he and Williams aren't carrying their expected load.

But for my money, and that isn't much, the biggest disappointment to this point has been Anderson Varejao. Maybe it was wishful thinking but this series seemed tailor made for Varejao's coming out party in his free agent season. With

everything to play for, I expected Varejao to simply give Dwight Howard fits. He hasn't.

Varejao is playing almost exactly the same number of minutes in the playoff s generally and in the Magic series as he did during the regular season. While is rebound total overall is down 1 per game during the playoffs, it's down almost 4 per game during this series. That's a dramatic difference. Certainly it reflects the presence of Howard, but it also reflects a certain lack of effectiveness by Varejao. He's demonstrating that for all the good he did this season, there are still significant moments when he disappears when faced with stiff competition.

James, on the other hand, isn't just holding his own but is going beyond what he did in the regular season. That's what the gifted do. They save their best for when it matters most. Whenever this season ends, James will have solidified his status as that once in a generation player that he surely is.

This isn't to suggest that West, Williams or Varejao are choking away the series for the Cavs. Again, the Magic right now are a better team. But in part, maybe large part, the Magic are a better team precisely because West, Williams and Varejao haven't yet made the full adjustment to life in the white hot spotlight.

For reasons that are as mysterious as they are unclear, the Magic's players on the other hand have gone in the opposite direction. Despite a sometimes scattered approach, every one on that team has found a way to not only replicate what they've done in the regular season but to go beyond it.

Rashard Lewis, for example, hit 43% of his field goals in the regular season and 35% of his three-point attempts. Against the Cavs, he's hitting 55% and 58%, respectively. Rafer Alston is doing likewise. During the regular season he hit 38% of his field goals and only 34% of his three-point attempts. Yet against the Cavs he's at 45% and 43%, respectively. Same story for Mickael Pietrus. Both his field goal percentage and his three-point percentage are up dramatically in this

series from what they were in the regular season.

No one doubts the pressure of these playoffs. It can do funny things to a person. It's turning lesser talents like Alson and Pietrus into almost larger than life figures. Alston looks like the best shooter in the league. For his part, James can stand at the free throw line with literally no time remaining and make two free throws to send it into overtime and he looks almost casual doing it. West and Williams can get the same looks at the basket they've seen all season but can't find a way to make the shots go down consistently.

When general manager Danny Ferry did his makeover of the team, it was done with the idea of winning titles not just respect. He's done a good job of assembling talent but right now there are ingredients that are still missing. Despite his best intentions James is still carrying far too big of the load because the players he counted on during the regular season have been far less reliable when needed most. Who would blame him for passing up a pass he might otherwise have made?

This doesn't mean that the Cavs need to undergo another makeover this next offseason, whenever it reminds. It just means that whatever improvement they make will be much more difficult. Williams and West, in particular, are extremely talented. The difference is mental and that's the most difficult adjustment to make. Right now they are a like 2 handicap golfer trying to get to scratch. They have the tools but there are still more things they need to learn about course management and, by the way, they need to make a few more putts.

Whatever else this season holds for the Cavs, the one thing it's held thus far has been the fans' fascination. It's the same fascination that Cleveland fans had for the 1995 and 1997 versions of the Indians. But those teams couldn't win a title either for much the same reason this Cavs team is falling short at the moment. But if the Cavs do find a way to suddenly reverse course, there's one thing in which to take great comfort: there will be no Jose Mesa-like meltdown. With James, the Cavs have the ultimate closer.