You know the story by now. Instead of playing for a championship during the best season in franchise history, the Cavs were manhandled by the Magic in six games -- and can actually consider themselves fortunate they weren't swept themselves. They went from huge expectations to major heartache, a rite of spring, summer and fall that the good folks of Cleveland know all too well. Seriously, though. How does a team that once seemed to have everything get better? How does it fix something that once looked unstoppable? How does it build on a near-perfect season? Sam tells us in his latest column.

Well, that sure was a letdown.

That's what everyone who cares about the Cleveland Cavaliers has been thinking these past eleven days. After all, the Cavs finished with the league's best record, swept the first two rounds of the playoffs, and were expected to make short work of the Orlando Magic in the Eastern Conference finals.

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Seriously, though. How does a team that once seemed to have everything get better? How does it fix something that once looked unstoppable? How does it build on a near-perfect season?

Granted, there are no perfect teams in the NBA, and it's not exactly breaking ground to say the Cavs simply did not match up with the Magic. Heck, some say that if the Magic had played Detroit in the first round, they never would have made it to Cleveland.

But the Cavs' elimination goes beyond just matchups. It's probably more like a combination of matchups, personnel and even coaching.

That's not to imply Mike Brown is a bad coach. He's not. He's a young coach (still), a defensive whiz, and someone who seems like he could give a hoot about offense. Or at least, someone who believes that the best offense is the result of great defense -- that if you get stops, everything else will fall into place.

That is indeed true. To a point.

After all, the Cavs' best outing in the conference finals was Game 5, when they scored 112 points and gave up 102. So you can talk about defensive systems all you want, but against a team like Orlando (and the Lakers, for that matter) you better be able to put the ball in the peach basket.

You wouldn't think that'd be a problem with a guy like LeBron James on the team,

but for some reason, the Cavs' have seemed content to grind it out during the Brown era. Interestingly, that's not how things went at the beginning of the year, when new point guard Mo Williams was given the keys to the offense and was able to spend the majority of the game, as he liked to say, "Nash-ing it."

Williams was referring to his ability to freelance and make things happen off the dribble, a la Phoenix All-Star Steve Nash. It worked beautifully for the Cavs at first, as Williams fit right in and for the first time during Brown's reign, the offense was a thing of beauty.

There was passing, cutting, making the extra pass, hitting the open man, and mostly, excellent spacing. It was as if Mark Price, Brad Daugherty, Larry Nance and Coach Lenny Wilkens were back at the old Richfield Coliseum pummeling the Miami Heat by 68 points.

Then suddenly, everything changed for the modern-day Cavs. And it seemed to change at the worst possible time -- on Christmas Day. The Cavs beat Washington, but it was quite possibly their worst game of the season (other than perhaps a 29-point loss in Orlando in early April).

In the Christmas game against the Wizards, the Cavs looked tired, lazy and confused on offense. They reverted to the old philosophy of standing around and watching and waiting for James to bail them out. It was the type of ugly, game-to-game inconsistency that had dominated Cavs' basketball since Brown became coach five seasons ago. It won more than it lost, but it was hardly pleasing to the eye. It advanced to the Finals, but you knew it wouldn't work forever.

As this season continued, it became evident that the Cavs were vastly superior to the Kings, Clippers and Bobcats of the NBA world. But there were red flags -- and no, not just because of their 3-6 combined record against heavyweights Orlando,

Boston and the Lakers.

They struggled mightily against the lowly Wizards. They scraped by in road games against Oklahoma City and Minnesota. They were outsmarted time and time again by the Magic. Far too often, they were outplayed in the third quarter immediately following halftime, when their opponent had time to adjust.

Worst of all, some of the Cavs' wins displayed their weaknesses considerably more than their losses -- but if you're winning, well, it's only natural to feel good. So why bother messing with success?

As for personnel, it's quite clear that stealing Mo Williams from Milwaukee wasn't enough. It's quite clear that the Cavs need yet another potential All-Star. It's quite clear they need some serious help along the frontline, as well as off the bench everywhere.

Center Zydrunas Ilgauskas is 34 years old and has undergone five foot surgeries. His body will break down late in the year if he's logging more than 30 minutes a night. Especially if you're gonna ask him to defend Dwight Howard in the season's biggest series.

Forward Anderson Varejao made huge strides offensively, but too often disappears in big games. And while he's superb at supplying energy off the bench, he's not a starting power forward for a championship team. That's something the Cavs will want to consider when Varejao opts out of his contract this summer to become a free agent. The Cavs don't want to overpay him; but they do need him.

Big men Ben Wallace and Joe Smith are past their primes, and rookie forward J.J. Hickson is still very raw. Of those three, only Hickson is likely to return. Wallace said he's retiring, but you can believe it when you see it, because that would mean

leaving $14 million just sitting there. Either way, his expiring contract gives the Cavs some real bargaining power.

As for the backcourt, maybe Delonte West shouldn't be starting. He'd make a wonderful sixth man, considering he's the team's best on-ball defender and someone who can supply bushels of baskets in a matter of minutes. But until someone else comes along, West deserves the spot.

Wally Szczerbiak is a free agent and won't be back, which is great news for the Cavs since his departure will free up $13 million. Meanwhile, Daniel Gibson and Sasha Pavlovic were both wildly erratic and you can be sure GM Danny Ferry will spend the summer desperately attempting to unload both.

There are a number of unrestricted free agents who the Cavs could make a play for, guys who might fit in well. At the same time, they don't want to overspend since the contract of You Know Who will be up in 2010.

Still, of this year's batch of available players, athletic forward Shawn Marion (Toronto) is someone who may be able to fix the matchup issues with the Magic all by himself. The same goes for forwards Lamar Odom and Trevor Ariza (Lakers) or Ron Artest (Houston).

Also, guard Jamal Crawford is expected to opt out with Golden State, and forward and former Cav Drew Gooden (San Antonio) could be had for cheap.

And let's not forget aging stars like Jason Kidd, Rasheed Wallace, Mike Bibby and (hey, don't laugh) Allen Iverson. All are available.

The good news for the Cavs is they are very close. They are one of about four

teams in the league that can say nothing short of a championship will suffice, and they can say it with a straight face.

That is why, even after such an emotional loss, they need to take care not to gut the team. There's no need for it. A little roster patchwork here and there should be all they really need.

Then again, if the Magic are still having their way with them by the middle of next season, the personnel won't be the only thing that needs a little fixing. It will likely mean an entire overhaul of philosophy and that will begin with the man drawing up the plays.