The Cavaliers aren't likely a finished product, but they're getting there. And if nothing else, they have improved the bench. At the end of this past season, key players off the bench were Joe Smith and Ben Wallace and sometimes Wally Szczerbiak up front, and Daniel Gibson, Sasha Pavlovic and sometimes Szczerbiak in the backcourt. This coming season, the Cavs bench figures to feature Big Z, Anthony Parker, and hopefully Jamario Moon ... as well as some new youngsters who looked good in summer league play. Sam Amico talks about it in his latest piece for us.

The Cavaliers aren't likely a finished product, but they're getting there. And if nothing else, they have improved the bench.

At the end of this past season, key players off the bench were Joe Smith and Ben Wallace and sometimes Wally Szczerbiak up front, and Daniel Gibson, Sasha Pavlovic and sometimes Szczerbiak in the backcourt.

Now look at the bench as it stands right now.

Zydrunas Ilguaskas, a veteran starter at center, will back up Shaquille O'Neal.

Free-agent signee Anthony Parker will file the role of Pavlovic as a big guard. And assuming Miami doesn't match the Cavs' offer for restricted free-agent forward

Jamario Moon, he'll replace the place of Szczerbiak -- at least in the frontcourt.

That's three new and very capable veterans off the bench in Ilgauskas, Parker and Moon. The returns of Szczerbiak and Smith are up in the air, but even if they don't return, the Cavs have some potential replacements.

One guy I really like is someone who spent the majority of last season on the inactive list. That would be none other than young forward Jawad Williams -- who played very well in the D-League and may have been the best player on the summer roster.

Call me crazy, but I think Williams can be a scorer off the bench and help fill the role of Szczerbiak if Williams improves on defense. (Actually, he'll have to if he expects to play for coach Mike Brown.)

The frontcourt also could be helped by the returns of second-year forwards Darnell Jackson and J.J. Hickson. Both displayed the potential to become regular rotation players last season, and you can bet practicing against O'Neal will only help them improve. If one of them comes around quickly, the Cavs certainly won't miss the often-injured and quickly fading Wallace.

As for the backcourt, I am especially high on second-round pick Danny Green. Granted, counting on a rookie -- particularly one who was picked in the second round -- is always extremely risky. But Green is well-rounded, athletic and always hustling. He also played all four years at North Carolina, where he won a national championship. There's a lot to be said for entering the NBA as an "older" rookie who's been with a winning program. I wouldn't be surprised if Green, at the very least, becomes a once-in-a-while contributor.

And while Gibson was frustrating last season with his inability to hit wide-open shots, it's much too soon to write him off. Like last year, he'll get every opportunity

to win the job of third guard off the bench, as unlike Parker, Gibson can play either backcourt position and fill in for Mo Williams or Delonte West. At least, that's the theory. But this season will be important for Gibson. If he doesn't put it together quickly, he could find himself playing in Turkey when his contract expires.

As for Smith and Szczerbiak, there is still a chance both will return. Of course, there's a chance neither will be back, but it appears no one is in any hurry to find out. Smith is likely to get some feelers around the league, but neither he nor Szczerbiak are likely to get the money they are seeking. Their best bet may be to return to a team that knows and appreciates them for a minimum amount of money. Truth is, neither is likely to do much better than that.

As Terry Pluto wrote in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the Cavs clearly improved themselves with the additions of O'Neal and Parker, and likely Moon. That's especially the case when it comes to playoff basketball, where the value of veterans drastically increases.

But it sure wouldn't hurt for one of their younger guys -- Gibson, Green, Williams, Hickson, Jackson or even Tarence Kinsey -- to have a breakthrough year. If that happens, they'll have an excellent shot at winning their first title.

Even if it doesn't the odds still figure to be pretty good. Basically, an improved bench means new reasons for hope.

*Sam Amico is the editor of ProBasketballNews.com and a regular contributor to SportsTime Ohio and The Cleveland Fan.*