They may be the Detroit Pistons, but don't call them a rival. At least, they're not the Pistons we once knew and loved. Or, as the case may be, the Pistons that Cavaliers fans once despised. Gone from the Pistons of yesteryear are Chauncey Billups, Antonio McDyess and everyone's favorite villain, Rasheed Wallace. In their place are less-familiar guys such as Rodney Stuckey, Ben Gordon and Charlie Villanueva. Heck, they even brought back Ben Wallace and hired former Cavs assistant John Kuester as their new head coach. Sam talks about the new look Pistons in his latest.

INDEPENDENCE - They may be the Detroit Pistons, but don't call them a rival. At least, they're not the Pistons we once knew and loved. Or, as the case may be, the Pistons that Cavaliers fans once despised.

Gone from the Pistons of yesteryear are Chauncey Billups, Antonio McDyess and everyone's favorite villain, Rasheed Wallace.

In their place are less-familiar (and more likeable) guys such as Rodney Stuckey, Ben Gordon and Charlie Villanueva. Heck, they even brought back Ben Wallace, who earned love as a center in Cleveland the past two seasons -- and hired former Cavs assistant John Kuester as their new head coach.

Clearly, these Pistons are hard to hate.

"We've got a lot of history between us," LeBron James said at Tuesday's practice. "But I don't really see it as a rivalry."

Part of that may have to do with the fact the Cavs have eliminated the Pistons in each of their previous two playoff meetings, including last year's sweep in the first round. The other, of course, came in the 2007 Eastern Conference finals.

Part of it may also have to do with the fact the Cavs have been considered an Eastern Conference power for at least two years now, while the Pistons are currently in a rebuilding phase. The Cavs are 10-4 heading into Wednesday's game in Auburn Hills, Mich.; the made-over Pistons are 5-9.

And part of it may have to do with the fact the Cavs have won seven straight over the Pistons, and done it by an average of a whopping 14.1 points per game.

"Their team has changed," said Cavs coach Mike Brown. "(In 2007), they were already established. We were trying to claw our way up."

Things are the other way around today. Especially since holdovers Richard Hamilton (ankle) and Tayshaun Prince (back) have missed some time with injuries, and could very sit out the teams' first meeting of the season. (Hamilton has only played in one game this season, Prince in three.)

Of the healthy players, Gordon leads the team in scoring at 20.6 points per game, with Stuckey (16.5), Villanueva (15.6) and little-known backup point guard Will Bynum (14.2) having become the other top options.

"It's just gonna take them some time to gel," Brown said. "They're similar to us in that they have a few new guys and a few injuries."

Meanwhile, James once again leads the Cavs at 29.4 points, 8.1 assists and 6.8

rebounds per game. Mo Williams (who was a teammate of Villanueva's in Milwaukee) averages 17.3 points, while Shaquille O'Neal averages 11.3.

Of course, not everything is different when it comes to Detroit. That's especially the case when talking about the place they call home, also known as the Palace of Auburn Hills.

"It's still one of the toughest arenas, with their fans and the way they always talk," James said with a smile.

Other than that, it's just another game for the Cavs. Even if not, it sure isn't a rivalry.

"It sure doesn't feel like it anyway," Brown said.

NOTES

* O'Neal returned to practice Monday after missing the previous five games with a sore shoulder. He is expected to play Wednesday. "Anytime someone misses a couple of games, it takes a little time to get reacquainted," Brown said. "But he's got a great feel for the game. He'll step right in."

* Kuester was considered the Cavs' "offensive coordinator" last year, when they compiled the league's best regular-season record (66-16). He has changed the Pistons' from a defense-first team to one that often just tries to outscore you. "They can play a lot of different ways," Brown said. "Offensively, they can string some points together."

* Brown on his former assistant: "We miss (Kuester). He's a great guy who was great for our team."

* Cavs center Zydrunas Ilgauskas has played in 721 games as a member of the Cavaliers. He is now just two away from tying Cavs GM Danny Ferry's franchise record (723) of games played.

* Cavs shooting guard Anthony Parker is third in the NBA in 3-point percentage, hitting .528 percent of his shots (28-53) from beyond the arc. Williams (.484) is ninth in the league in the same category.

* The Cavs will celebrate Thanksgiving in Detroit at the home of team owner Dan Gilbert on Thursday. They play Friday in Charlotte, then return to Quicken Loans Arena on Saturday to face Western Conference contender Dallas.

Sam Amico covers the Cavaliers and NBA for NBA.com, and is a regular contributor to SportsTime Ohio and The Cleveland Fan.