Right now, the Cavaliers look like a contender. They just don't look like a championship contender. That's the best thing you can say about the Cavs following their rather lethargic 95-85 loss in Houston on Wednesday night. That, of course, followed a bad loss to lowly Memphis the night before. Sam Amico says that he's seen a couple of troubling patterns develop in this little swoon the Cavs find themselves in. And he talks about them in his recap of last night's loss.

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Obviously, this team has a few issues. And they aren't just issues that can be cast aside as a case of the early-season doldrums. After all, Coach Mike Brown is a big picture kind of guy -- and the way the Cavs have been playing does not bode well for the big picture. At least it doesn't if you're talking about winning a title, something the Cavs say they believe can be accomplished.

Here are a few reasons to be alarmed:

* Whether Brown is entirely to blame or not, the truth is the Cavs have pretty much been the same team in his four seasons as coach. In other words, regardless of personnel, they always lose to lousy teams, or at least teams that you likely have penciled in as wins upon an initial examination of the schedule. Already this season, they've fallen to non-playoff qualifiers like Memphis and Washington on the road, and a bad Chicago team at home. In each of those games, they surrendered double-digit leads.

* Also, with Brown at the helm, the Cavs have been flat-out predictable. Aside from LeBron James, their offense has lacked creativity, and for some unknown reason, seems to go into major, unexplained funks during the course of the game. That's especially the case in the third quarter. It makes you wonder if the other teams make adjustments at halftime and the Cavs don‘t, or if the Cavs do nothing but sit in the locker room and eat turkey between the second and third quarters. Either way, their sluggish starts to the second half must come to an end if they are serious about winning a championship.

* Shaquille O'Neal looks old and worn out. I'm not gonna say the big fella is completely washed up, because he still offers plenty of positives. The most obvious is the space he clogs in the lane defensively. He was a major factor in the win over Orlando, as Shaq put the clamps on Dwight Howard. On most nights, he will be a factor when it comes to rebounding and putting pressure on defenders near the basket. He may not be the Shaq of old, but he still is the type of inside presence the Cavs have lacked during the LeBron era. That said, the man sure misses a lot of easy attempts near the hoop, as he doesn't have nearly the lift (or strength) on his shots that he displayed last season in Phoenix.

* Memphis and Houston buried the Cavs with wide-open long-range shots, in almost the exact same fashion Orlando did in the Eastern Conference finals last season. So it appears opposing teams learned a lot about how to beat the Cavs by watching the Magic. Basically, the Cavs' perimeter defense stinks. Almost

everyone seems to get open looks against them near and beyond the three-point arc these days. Grizzlies guard O.J. Mayo shot from the same spots as Magic forward Rashard Lewis did against the Cavs in the playoffs last season, as Mayo popped out off picks and Cavs defenders were slow to react. The Rockets also had their best three-point shooting night of the season against the Cavs.

* This is an ongoing issue in strategy, and a big reason the Cavs have been blowing huge leads ever since the conference finals. The additions of Anthony Parker and Jamario Moon were supposed to fix that -- but again, you can't help but wonder if they are being used correctly. You can't help but wonder if it's the system, and particularly, the defensive philosophy. And again, you can't help but wonder if the necessary adjustments are simply being overlooked by the coaching staff.

* The Cavs have been committing an insane amount of turnovers against teams not known for defense (read: the Rockets and Grizzlies). And LeBron is just as guilty as anyone, maybe more so, when it comes to taking care of the ball. Mo Williams has been particularly awful in this department -- and really isn't much different than the player he was in Milwaukee, where he had a reputation for a lack of consistency and disappearing in big games and moments. He and the rest of the Cavs seem to have a real issue with opponents getting physical, as that is what has led to most of the miscues. It all boils down to toughness, and right now, the Cavs are looking a little faint-hearted.

* Parker is beginning to play like a guy who should be coming off the bench -- and that's OK. The Cavs didn't acquire him this past off-season with the idea he would be starting. But he was forced into the role after the ongoing mood disorder issues with Delonte West. It's not clear yet if West has a better handle on things, but one thing is for sure: It's time for him to reclaim his starting spot. He has played considerably better than anyone not named LeBron during the past week, showing aggressiveness, courage and intelligence. He should be rewarded for it, and not have to wonder if he'll play more minutes than the unreliable and usually ineffective Daniel Gibson.

There are a few other minor things, such as J.J. Hickson's bad hands, Zydrunas Ilgauskas' inability to adapt to his role off the bench, and just a general lack of cohesion by everyone. But those things can be dealt with over time.

So, is it time to panic? Hardly. But it's also time for the Cavs to start realizing they have no chance at a title unless a few very troubling patterns change. Unfortunately, they are patterns that have been in place for several years now.

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