Shaquille O'Neal's first two months in a Cavaliers uniform required a big-picture definition of success.

If you were to believe that the soon-to-be 38 year old man-mountain was going to help the Cavs win a title, you had to believe in what he could give the team in the long run. Because on a night to night basis, he looked like a fading star whose time had come and gone.

You had to pin your hopes on his ability to rise to the occasion against marquee opponents, such as the work he did in battling Dwight Howard to a draw in the Cavs' cathartic November victory in Orlando. Or his 11 point, 7 rebound showing in the Cavs' Christmas Day drubbing of the Lakers in Los Angeles.

You had to try and remind yourself that the ultimate measuring stick of Danny Ferry's decision to trade for Shaq last June will be in Shaq's effectiveness against the likes of the Lakers, Celtics and Magic. And that verdict won't be rendered until late spring.

How he plays against the Memphis Grizzlies in December? That's pretty much irrelevant, you had to convince yourself. Shaq only has so much gas left in the tank, and he needs to save it for when it really matters. If he coasts through some of the less-competitive parts of the schedule, it is still worth it if he's neutralizing the frontcourts of other contenders in late May and June.

That line of thinking is entirely rooted in logic. Ferry didn't trade for Shaq to beat the Grizzlies, Knicks or Bulls. The Cavs prior to Shaq's arrival could do that just fine. They needed Shaq to neutralize the matchup disadvantages that caused them to go a combined 3-8 against the Magic and Lakers last season, including playoffs.

As the mediocre Shaq showings piled on top of each other, you had to cling to that ideal. It's not

about minutes, points or rebounds -- Shaq is on pace for career lows in all three categories -- it's about stuffing Howard in the lane, about not letting Pau Gasol receive the ball wherever he wants it. It's about doing the things that don't necessarily show up in Shaq's stat line, but will definitely show up in the stat lines of opposing big men, in the form of smaller numbers.

And yet, even if you succeeded in maintaining that big-picture line of thinking, there was this persistent, bugging thought gnawing at the base of your brain as the 2009 portion of the schedule progressed.

Shaq really didn't look good out there. He looked out of sync. He looked uncomfortable in his role as a defensive enforcer first, rebounder second and low post scorer third.

He looked a little out of condition, like his summer reality series, "Shaq Vs.," really wasn't the new spin on offseason conditioning that he thought it would be. He was playing 21 minutes a night, and looked as if stretching to 26 minutes would require the postgame use of an oxygen mask and wheelchair.

Even with a reduced offensive role, Shaq still needed some touches in the post, and every time the ball went inside to Shaq, it turned the Cavs offense on its ear. The Cavs won 66 games last season by using smaller lineups and playing to LeBron's strengths -- incredible speed and power. The Cavs were at their best when they could play fast, penetrate to the basket and create open looks for jump shooters.

Accommodating Shaq means slowing all of that down, and giving him a chance to dig his toes in on the left block. Mike Brown was sort of stuck in limbo, not wanting to abandon the high-velocity approach that made the Cavs an unstoppable juggernaut against 27 of 29 teams last year. But he also knew that in order to make the Shaq experiment work, he needed to get the big guy involved.

The net result was Shaq received some touches in his low-post comfort zone, but not a lot of them. To his credit and in a reversal of his attitude at other career stops, Shaq never once uttered a word of public complaint. His steadfast motto was "Witness Protection." Whatever he needed to do to enable LeBron to win games, that's what he said he wanted to do.

But it harmed his game. His shots fell flat. He jumped like he was bolted to the ground. Younger, quicker opponents routinely smacked the ball out of his hands. Missing games early in the season with a shoulder injury didn't help matters.

His season reached its nadir in back-to-back losses at Memphis and Houston in early December. Against Memphis, he was abused by Ohio State product Mike Conley on a pick and roll that led to the Grizzlies' game-winning basket in overtime. The next night, Chuck Hayes, a 6'-6" center-in-name-only, outplayed Shaq the whole time the two shared the floor.

The red flags were up. Knowledgeable basketball people e-mailed Brian Windhorst , Cavs beat reporter for The Plain Dealer, declaring the death of Shaq's career. It was hard to argue the evidence, even if you were dead-set on evaluating Shaq based solely on how he played against

other contenders.

Luckily, the regular season lasts five and a half months, not two months.

Looking back, his effort against the Lakers on Christmas Day was something of a turning point. It's happened gradually, but Shaq is back to being Shaq. A late-30s Shaq, but definitely Shaq.

In the game following the Christmas beatdown of the Lakers, Shaq atoned for his performance in Houston by registering his fourth Cavs double-double in the rematch with the Rockets at The Q. That in and of itself wasn't noteworthy, but it was back-to-back productive games. It was a start.

The production was still kind of sporadic, but he managed a 17-point effort against Washington in early January. Four days later, in Portland, he compiled his best all-around effort: 11 points, 11 rebounds, 5 assists and a big lip-smacker on actor Daniel Baldwin, who was sitting behind the basket when Shaq came tumbling his way.

The good games were becoming more frequent for Shaq. As important, he looked like he was beginning to enjoy his role and fit into the Cavs' scheme.

But Shaq didn't truly become a load-bearing wall for the Cavs until January 19. Since then, he's really flourished.

Jan. 19 is when Mo Williams sprained his shoulder against the Raptors. Along with the gut-check knowledge that the Cavs' second-best scorer could be on the shelf until March, Brown was also faced with the question of how to replace Mo's offense.

In past years, Mo's production would have been replaced piecemeal-style. LeBron would take more shots, Delonte West would take more shots, and the bench would need to step up and assume more minutes and shots.

This season, the safety net weighs a conservatively-estimated 325 pounds. Which is good, because Delonte went to the sideline with a broken finger in the very next game, removing even more scoring from the floor.

Though Brown certainly didn't consider it an ideal situation to ramp up Shaq's touches and minutes so suddenly, and with two and a half months of regular season still left to play, his hand was forced. Shaq would get the ball on the block and take more shots.

The 15-time all-star, four-time NBA champion and future hall of famer responded like you'd expect a 15-time all-star, four-time NBA champion and future hall of famer to respond: he stopped fooling around, focused on the task at hand and has been getting the job done.

Over the past week, Shaq has been playing his best ball as a Cav. He scored 22 points on 8-of-10 shooting against Indiana, and followed that with 16 points and 12 boards against the Clippers, and 13 points and a season-high 13 boards in the rematch against the Grizzlies, a

runaway Cavs win.

This is how Shaq, and the Cavs, will need to play in the later playoff rounds if they're to have a realistic shot at the franchise's first NBA title. Even though Shaq is playing more than Ferry or Brown would prefer, it's comforting to know that Shaq Diesel was still in the garage and functional while Shaq Lemon was rattling and clunking through the early stages of the season.

And it's relieving to know that the Cavs are learning how to play, dominate and win with Shaq as a focal point of both the offense and defense.

Maybe how Shaq plays against the Grizzlies in the dead of winter does count for something after all.