[In October, **J.D. Shultz** conducted a comprehensive interview with our friend, **Sam Greenspan** . . . an L.A.-based, Cleveland-rooted comedian, who writes the brilliant comedy website 11points.com .]

[We asked Sam for his thoughts on the Cavs, the new acquisitions, the Delonte West situation, the possibility of trading Zydrunas Ilgauskas' contract, and the landscape in the Eastern Conference.]

[And since we're at the halfway point . . . at least, with regards to the All-Star Break . . . we decided to do a follow-up, to revisit some of Sam's projections and predictions from the preseason. And again, as is his nature, Sam took our questions and re-worked them into 11 points. He can't help it.]

JD: Before the season, you said you were happy with what Danny Ferry did in the offseason, because it addressed specific weaknesses that were exposed by the Orlando Magic in the playoffs last year. We haven't seen Leon Powe yet (although his arrival is imminent), but what is your take on how the other new Cavaliers have performed in the first three months of the

season? Any surprises or disappointments?

Sam: 1.) The new Cavs have all done about what I expected (although for one of them it took a long time to get there).

Anthony Parker has fit in well in the Shane Battier role -- and I'm not just saying that because he's a super intelligent light-skinned black guy. What I mean: Thanklessly guard the other team's superstar and knock down threes when the ball gets swung to you. Brian Windhorst gave him a lower grade during his midseason review -- I think it was a C+ -- so I think I'm a little higher on him. But, come playoff time, he's going to be great to throw at Kobe or Carmelo or Wade or Paul Pierce or Joe Johnson. (Or, I guess, Vince Carter -- although I feel like they could just pick a random fan out of the stands and he or she could shut down Vince Carter at this point. I'm so disappointed that I'm writing this shortly after Carter had his first good game in three years. Don't let his entire disastrous season be obfuscated by one recent game. It's the exception and not the rule. That 5-16 he put up against the Cavs? That is the real Vince Carter.)

It felt like Jamario Moon was out forever with his injury, so I haven't seen quite enough of him to make a full evaluation. But he's making athletic plays, earning minutes defensively -- and, most importantly, is a great defensive asset to have coming off the bench in the playoffs. I'd say he's ranked third out of the three new guys in terms of impact, but he's still an asset.

Shaq has been a wild ride. At first it was tough to watch -- I thought he'd fit in faster. But finally, with the injuries to the guards and the continued maturity of the team and the offense, he's settled into his rightful place. However -- that's not what matters. The reason the Shaq addition makes me confident: Orlando and the Lakers. Last year, both of those teams would've killed us with skilled big men. This year, that opportunity isn't so available. Like he said after the Orlando game: He doesn't need or want double team help. He can keep Howard out of position and in foul trouble on his own. And that is the main reason I don't think the Magic will upset the Cavs in the playoffs again.

The common thread in all three guys: Stopping the teams that we'll inevitably see in the playoffs. As long as Shaq stays healthy enough to bang with Howard and then Gasol/Bynum, I

feel good.

In terms of surprises, the emergence out of nowhere of Jawad Williams is pretty good -- though I don't really see him getting too many minutes in the playoff rotation. J.J. Hickson tends to frustrate me more often than any other Cav -- I love the athletic plays and flashes of brilliance, hate that he often makes Braylon Edwards look sure-handed and Drew Gooden look defensively attentive.

JD: Delonte West has had his ups and downs, but recently - up until his finger injury - he was active for nearly every game, and he was starting to have a lot of special games. His court date has been pushed back to April . . . and obviously no one knows how that's going to play out . . . but aside from that, what do you think of what Delonte has provided so far? And if things continue as they were before his injury, do you think that's enough Delonte for the Cavs?

Sam: 2.) I'm trying not to worry about the Delonte situation, but I can't help it. In my preseason predictions I said that I thought getting into the season routine, surrounded by a "family" of players and coaches, would be the perfect remedy for Delonte. He gets in trouble with free time. There's no free time during the season. After a rocky start, I think that completely manifested.

Unfortunately, the gun possession court date looms large. If things go poorly, Delonte could miss some or all of the playoffs. And that, I do not like. He's our best defensive guard. Rondo, Billups, Jameer Nelson (if he remembers how to play) -- plus shifts on the Kobes and Joe Johnsons of the world -- he's an incredibly valuable piece of the puzzle.

More on this to come, but suffice to say that Delonte holds an inordinate amount of power in his oddly-tattooed hands. If only he'd actually put a guitar in that guitar case.

JD: You said you expected this to be a make-or-break year for Daniel Gibson. He had the sensational "break-out" in the 2007 playoffs . . . and has been fighting through injuries and an inconsistent role ever since. How do you think he's played up to this point, and do you see his career being made or broken?

Sam: 3.) I didn't get that prediction right. Daniel Gibson's season has been too unpredictably

uneven. He's shooting the ball better than he ever has, especially the three. When he touches the ball now, when it leaves his hands on a three, I get excited... it feels exactly like it felt in the '07 playoffs. When the other two guards went down he stepped in and beautifully took over the starting point guard spot. He's confident again, he's driving to the basket and he looks like he's made unthinkable offensive strides.

That is -- when he can get off the bench. Defensively, it's still clear he's not a Mike Brown-caliber player. When the team's at full strength, Gibson is probably Brown's 10th man, solely on his defense. I think Brown would rather stop Joe Johnson than have the best three point threat in the league out there on offense. That's Delonte/Parker/Jamario versus Gibson in a nutshell.

So I don't know if this season is going to make or break Gibson after all. I do think he's absolutely earned the right to some minutes when Mo and Delonte are both back... but I don't see him having a series-changing impact on the playoffs like he did a few years back. (Unless, of course, Delonte is out and Brown is forced to give Gibson meaningful minutes. Then, that can and will be Gibson's make-or-break moment.)

JD: At the beginning of the season, you thought the Cavs' "X-factor"would be the big men. Anderson Varejao has been consistently amazing so far, but J.J. Hickson has been inconsistent. Shaquille O'Neal and Zydrunas Ilgauskas started off a little slow, but now they're finding their places. Is the Cavs' frontcourt still the team's "X-Factor"?

Sam: 4.) One of the greatest things to watch this year has been Varejao's evolution from taking charges and cringeworthy shots into a defensive stopper who puts in three reverse layups and one to two dunks a game on brilliant cuts without the ball. He's showing everyone who doubted his big contract why he's so unquantifiably valuable.

It's been a rocky year for Z. I still don't think he's comfortable coming off the bench -- the jumper isn't so automatic anymore and he looks slower than ever. Shaq came around, though... and, with that "who's our best center?" nonsense clearing up, perhaps some pressure will be lifted from Z.

I'm going to switch the X-Factor to Delonte. I trust our bigs (especially when Powe finally starts playing) to handle their business. If it's the Finals, game 7, fourth quarter and I can have LeBron, Mo, Delonte, Varejao and Shaq on the floor -- my heart rate is only elevated to 200

beats per minute instead of 250.

JD: Last year, the Cavs' 66-win regular season was undercut by some, who pointed out that they weren't able to beat the Lakers, and struggled against the elite teams on the road. This year, the Cavs won both games against the Lakers, beat Atlanta on a home-and-home back-to-back and won a nice game against the Magic in Orlando back in November . . . before triumphantly rising above them, without Mo, at home Thursday night. How much weight do you put onto these games?

Sam: 5.) The Lakers games were more important to the Cavs than the Lakers, because we have something to prove. In those games, though, we saw the formula for how we're going to beat them in the Finals. Neutralize Gasol, bang with Bynum a little bit to rattle him (by far and away the most overrated player in the league), throw the Parker/Moon/Delonte on Kobe, and pray that Artest keeps shooting. Those wins, if nothing else, mean that, in a Cavs-Lakers Finals, the media will at least predict Lakers in 5 instead of Lakers in 4.

I also liked the Orlando games because it showed why we got Shaq. Without Howard being able to terrorize the guy guarding him the double teams can stop and the shooters won't be so open (other than Rashard Lewis, who's rapidly turning into the NBA Player I Fear The Most). Still, that should keep them from shooting 94 percent from the three like they did in the Eastern Conference Finals.

To me, a 58-to-62 win season with wins over the elites is much, much better than last year's 66-win season without those wins. Especially since I've felt like the Cavs have been on cruise control for a lot of this season -- essentially treating it like extended training camp, figuring out their rotations and chemistry, and using their vastly superior talent to pull out a win in the fourth quarter.

JD: Is Orlando still the team that scares you the most in the East? Or are you now more worried about a "healthy" Boston Celtics team (like every one in the national media) or maybe even Atlanta (like everyone in Atlanta)?

Sam: 6.) In the preseason I said it was Orlando by default. I remain in that camp.

Boston is just not that good. The media can keep on making excuses for them (Injuries! Injuries! Injuries!) but they're just not that good. Garnett, when "healthy," has been off his game. Allen is aging like Robin Williams in "Jack". Pierce is only good when other guys are drawing attention -- as soon as a second defender comes toward him he's not such a threat any more. Rasheed Wallace has gotten softer, both literally -- he looks, um, un-hungry -- and figuratively -- shooting more and more of his long range jumpers. Rondo is the only scary player they've got left. I wouldn't be shocked if they find themselves in a dog fight with Toronto toward the end of the season, trying to figure out which one's going to be the four seed and which one is going to be the five.

Atlanta's not quite ready. They're good, but they're not championship good. The Cavs wouldn't sweep them like last year... but taking that team and adding a rejuvenated Jamal Crawford really isn't a championship maker. Other lower teams can hassle the Cavs -- Miami, Charlotte and Turkoglu/Bosh can all give the Cavs headaches -- but none have what it takes to win four playoff games against the Cavs. Not these Cavs, on this kind of a mission.

As for Orlando... they're less scary than last year, but still, BY FAR, the best the East has to offer up against the Cavs. As predicted, swapping out Turkoglu and replacing him with Carter has been an absolute disaster. Turkoglu is an assassin. Carter goes 8-for-20 every night. Jameer Nelson has been off his game. Howard, Rashard Lewis and all of their white marksmen are still scary, though, which separates them from the rest of the conference.

Still... they have no answer for the Cavs depth. They have no answer for LeBron. And, again, without Howard being constantly double-teamed, the shooters won't have 15 feet of separation like last year.

My absolute favorite moment of the Cavs-Magic game from this week wasn't LeBron stepping on the Magic's throat in the fourth quarter... it was JJ and Anderson in the first. When the Magic decided they were going to leave JJ and Anderson open and take their chances -- and the two responded by making smart, aggressive moves off the ball and dunking (and even shooting) the lights out. It was that adjustment that strengthened my resolve. (That was also my second-favorite moment of the season. My first favorite? Watching the Lakers and their fans have an absolute meltdown as the Cavs massacred them on Christmas. It was so brutal that Benson and Stabler were called in to investigate after the game.)

I see the Cavs having to face an "exorcise the demons" path to the championship (much like the

Colts finally beating the Patriots en route to their first Super Bowl win, or the Red Sox coming back from 0-3 to finally beat the Yankees en route to their first World Series. And I'm eternally sorry I just made a positive comparison between us and anything associated with Boston. I will never do that again).

In my crystal ball, Boston wins the 4-5 matchup, Orlando beats Atlanta in the 2-3 matchup. To get the ring, we'll have to go through Boston, Orlando and L.A. to get it. And we wouldn't want it any other way.

JD: All right, here we go. *[The Trade Deadline, Part One.]* Do you think the Cavs should / need to make a significant (meaning trading a rotation player) move? Why or why not? Would it matter if another elite team made a significant move?

Sam: 7.) I am alone in this opinion -- and definitely different than almost every single message board post I read -- but I am begging Ferry not to make a move. I sit there looking at the roster and there's no one I want to move. The good news (for me): As the days go on, I don't see Ferry making a move this year, at least not a major one. He's too smart. And the Cavs are playing too well to have any sense of desperation. There already aren't enough minutes to go around. The only, and I repeat only, people who I would be comfortable losing are Wally Szczerbiak and Cedric Jackson.

JD: *[The Trade Deadline, Part Two.]* Before the season, you said you didn't expect the Cavs to trade Z if they were winning. Well, they're winning . . . but what if an opportunity arose to add someone like Antawn Jamison, Andre Iguodala, or one of the other players rumored? Is it worth it to risk losing Z permanently (since we can't technically negotiate a buy-out with another team)? Is it worth losing J.J. ?

Sam: 8.) The one and only player worth trading for MIGHT be Jamison. Although his contract is going to look awfully foolish when he completely breaks down in the near future and handcuffs us. Iguodala is a good player but a terrible fit. Amar'e Stoudemire is a worse fit. Troy Murphy is a laughable fit. I don't necessarily see how Rip Hamilton on the back nine of his career fits our plans.

I love the Cavs as they're assembled now. They remind me of the Houston Rockets from the '90s. You take the transcendent player of the era and surround him with a carefully selected, finely-tuned group of role players. Some are all-star caliber, some would be all-stars on other

teams, some are just great defenders or shooters. But you build around your guy, everyone buys in, and you win with the team.

Iguodala doesn't work like that. He doesn't love defense, but he does love offense. Do we really need a worse version of LeBron fighting LeBron, Mo, Shaq and everyone else for shots? Isn't that what happened with Larry Hughes? Stoudemire is a player who has no interest in defense and relies on his athleticism for his offense... except he doesn't quite have as much of it after 4,000 surgeries. Should we really trade JJ, who, in an ideal situation, matures into becoming what Stoudemire was hoping to become, for a player who's hearing whispers of being washed up in his mid 20s? Troy Murphy. Come on. You really think THAT'S the missing piece of our puzzle or that extra sign of front office effort that's going to guarantee LeBron stays?

Iguodala and Stoudemire are the kinds of players that attract the message board fans. They're big names. They're flashy. They're the kind of guys Isiah Thomas would trade David Lee, a cloned version of David Lee, 16 draft picks and two Madison Square Garden interns-to-be-named-later to get. But they're expensive, they're not role players (nor particularly willing to be) and they're not good fits.

Jamison is a team guy, a great player, and someone we could win with. But we don't need him to win, and I feel like Z is a more valuable piece. I believe this team, as assembled, is a championship team. WITH Z and JJ.

Early in the Orlando game, when the Magic showed they weren't going to guard Hickson, Windhorst Tweeted something to the effect of "that's why the Cavs need a stretch four." Moments later, Mike Brown (who, by the way, has made strides we didn't know he could even make) made a quick adjustment and Hickson had the highest scoring quarter of his career. There were no more mentions of a stretch four. We're fine. This is a championship team as is.

JD: *[The Trade Deadline, Part Three.]* What do you think Danny Ferry would consider most in any trade talks . . . chemistry, the age of the core, the state of the frontcourt, the state of the backcourt, this year, the next three years, or using value (Z's contract) before it "expires"? (Barring some creativity, it could be the last opportunity before the end of *next* season to add a player who makes more than the Mid-Level Exception.)

Sam: 9.) I think Ferry's primary consideration for a trade would be this year -- make no mistake, the front office intends to win the championship this year. The entire LeBron era has built toward this moment. After that it would be the chemistry -- by all reports and evidence this team holds nightly slumber parties and give each other weekly greeting cards -- so it would have to be a hell of a deal to break that up. Plus, this team took a good portion of the season to figure out how to play together -- and once they did, they stopped losing. Integrating a new player in now seems so unnecessarily risky.

I think the value of Z's expiring contract is less important than the value of Z as our backup center. The only thing a trade can do is screw up the next three years -- filling us up with salary for guys who, other than Jamison, haven't fit in spectacularly on their teams. I still firmly believe LeBron isn't going anywhere... but on the chance he does, our team isn't a championship contender whether we've got Stoudemire, Iguodala, Jamison or whomever. I'm sorry I've been so down on all the trade questions because I know it's the "sexy" midseason subject. But, unlike the national media, we watch all the games -- we see the team in reality, not on paper or in 30-second highlight packages.

JD: Do you have a Cavs prediction for the rest of the season? (And beyond?)

Sam: 10.) I think the Cavs will lose a game again at some point. (Although, honestly, with the way they've closed out the first 60 percent of the season, we've all had inevitable delusions of grandeur.)

Eventually their habit of not bringing it against lesser teams will catch up with them again and they'll drop one to someone like the Pistons. I don't see them sweeping the "good" teams -- probably losing one to the Celtics and starting a streak of "See, the Celtics are still the best team in the history of teams, they could easily beat the mid-'90s Bulls while simultaneously appearing on VH1's 'I Love the '90s' and doing the running of the bulls" talk until we temporarily shut that up in May. (If the Cavs win the championship, I would expect ESPN's lead headline to be: "Cavs Win 2010 NBA Championship; Celtics Early Favorite For 2011").

I think they'll wrap up the #1 seed with somewhere in the low 60s in wins, and, I think, for better (fresh legs) or worse (lack of competitiveness yielding rust), that will mean a lot of rest for LeBron, Shaq and Mo. I think LeBron wins MVP and Varejao gets two votes for third-team all

defense because no one actually watches the games and all still believe he's just a flopper.

I will not back off my position during the preseason: I still think the Cavs win the title this year. Watching the games against the Lakers and watching Shaq neutralize Howard (and Vince Carter conspire with Dan Brown and the masons) have made me even more confident in that position.

Going forward, I still believe LeBron stays. (And Vegas agrees, you can only get 1-to-3 odds if you want to bet on him being in Cleveland next season, every other team is at least 7-to-1. Vegas bookmakers know more than any of us ever could.) I think Shaq will also re-sign for another year.

JD: And now . . . your "Facetime."

Sam: 11.) I hate that everything I wrote reads so rosy... I love the team as it is, think it's going to win the title this year, think every other team is terrible and think LeBron is going to stay in Cleveland. But let me turn this around on ya for a sec: I think it should actually mean MORE coming from me, a Cleveland fan, though, than it would from an outside observer. I'm just old enough to have seen it all: The Drive, Earnest Byner, Jordan over Ehlo, Jordan singlehandedly beating Price-Daugherty-Nance, Dave Justice, Jose Mesa, the Browns moving to Baltimore, the late '90s/early '00s Yankees, Tim Couch, Romeo Crennel, the 2007 ALCS, Eric Wedge, and, finally, the '09 Orlando Magic.

I'm 30 years old, I've never cheered for a team that's won a championship in my life, and I've seen my city invent new ways to give away do-or-die playoff games every time we fly too close to the sun. And even though I'm in my fourth decade of deeply-ingrained defense mechanism pessimism, I think we're watching the NBA champions in action. I'm not a Yankees or Lakers or Cowboys or Boston fan who expects nothing less than a championship every year. I'm the opposite. And I think that gives more, not less, gravitas to my lofty expectations and predictions.