The Cavaliers could be forgiven if they went into 2009-10 with the belief that their match-up problems of a year ago were a thing of the past. A lack of height on the outside and a lack of bulk on the inside had doomed Cleveland to a 3-8 combined record against ’09 Finals contestants Orlando and Los Angeles, including a loss to the Magic in the Eastern Conference Finals. So Danny Ferry went right out and added quite a bit of both: Shaquille O’Neal to fill the paint, Anthony Parker and Jamario Moon to lengthen the backcourt defense.

And it’s been so far, so good; at least when it comes to the Magic and Lake Show. Thanks in large part to its new additions- especially the Daddy- Cleveland is a combined 4-1 against their nemeses of last season. But a new bugaboo has risen; one that no one could have foreseen in November. Right now, the biggest concerns this team has are internal- namely the rash of injuries to frontline players, including that player of a certain importance wearing #23. But in terms of opponents, the biggest threat to Cleveland’s latest Championship dream might be one that, for the moment, isn’t even one of the top eight teams in the Eastern Conference standings.

On Halloween Night the Cavaliers ground out a 90-79 win over the Charlotte Bobcats. It was Cleveland’s seventh in a row over Charlotte, the last four by double digits. Two-and-a-half weeks later, the Bobcats acquired Stephen Jackson from the Golden State Warriors. Charlotte is 3-0 against Cleveland since that trade, the latest being the 110-93 blistering three weeks ago. That result can almost be discounted: the Cavaliers were playing the night after their exhausting overtime loss to Denver (the Nuggets lost in Washington that night, for what it’s worth) and Antawn Jamison had a performance that was so bad it can’t possibly be repeated.

On January 3rd in Cleveland, the Cavaliers jumped out to a 20-12 lead over the Cats late in the

first half. But Charlotte hung in and fought back. They overtook Cleveland near the end of the first half- and from there, every time the Cavaliers tried to regain control the Bobcats were up to the challenge. Charlotte took the lead for good with 56 seconds left and won it, 91-88. The loss snapped seven-game overall and twelve-game home winning streaks for the Cavaliers, who had played an afternoon game in New Jersey the day before.

There are commonalities in both of these games, ones that can't be dismissed if the Cavaliers and Bobcats meet in the spring:

Charlotte has a Big Three. Gerald Wallace, Stephen Jackson and longtime Cavalier killer Raymond Felton tormented the Cavaliers in both games. Wallace was stupendous in the November win with 31 points (on 14 shots), 14 rebounds and 3 steals while Captain Jack helped break it open with 11 points and 4 assists in the first half. The three combined for 58 points in the January meeting to outgun 56 from LeBron and Mo Williams. Playoff experience with these three shouldn't be a factor. Captain Jack has a nice record of postseason basketball, most notably his heroics in Golden State's 2007 shocker over Dallas. Felton hasn't played a playoff game as a pro. But he won a National Championship at North Carolina and it isn't as if he'll lose the ability to blow by Mo Williams just because it's a certain time on the calendar. And while Gerald Wallace only played 52 minutes in Sacramento's 2002-04 Playoff runs (think the Kings wish they'd protected him in the expansion draft?) he doesn't seem like the type to shy away from the challenge of the springtime.

Big perimeter players that can create their own shot, get to the basket and hit from outside- those are Jackson, Wallace and Felton. The Cavaliers don't have the ability to contain all three of them in any single game.

Charlotte's defense turned the Cavaliers into a passive, jump-shooting team in both the November and January meetings. Cleveland hoisted 19 more three-pointers than free throws in the two games. The Cavaliers had 13 free-throw attempts in the January loss, including a grand total of two by LeBron James. Cleveland shot 48 percent in that game and a solid 9-of-21 from downtown. But their inability to penetrate and get to the free throw line and their inability to get the ball in to Shaq (just five shot attempts) doomed them. The Bobcats are second in the NBA in scoring defense at 94.2 and they've held the Cavaliers under that number in all four meetings this season. They're a slow, deliberate team that should feel right at home in the 83-81 defensive hothouse that is Playoff basketball.

So should their coach.

Larry Brown has coached NBA Playoff Games in every Presidential Administration since Jimmy Carter's. He has coached in two NCAA Championship Games. And he has a long history of going to the grindstone in the big games. Coaching UCLA in the 1980 NCAA title game he used a slow pace to nearly pull off a huge upset of a far more talented Louisville team. In '88 his Kansas Jayhawks held explosive Oklahoma to 29 second-half points in a title-game upset. His '90s Pacers were rugged defensive teams and his 2001 76ers fought and slugged to the NBA Finals, winning two Game Sevens along the way. His offenses can be halting- the Bobcats scored 94 and 91 points in the November and January games- but in the Playoffs you need to be built for comfort, not speed.

And Larry Brown's coaching style offsets that of Mike Brown's almost to a tee. Larry coached his first NBA Playoff game on April 20, 1977, when Mike was seven years old. He has been playing Mike's game since before Mike hit puberty. Puttin' on your hard hats? Going after those 50-50 balls? Makin' 'em feel you? That's *just* Larry Brown's game. If the Cavaliers and Cats meet in the first round and Mike wants to throttle it down and win it in the half-court- which he will- he'll have a willing partner in that slow waltz.

This is not a team to be taken lightly. Charlotte has real match-up advantages over the Cavaliers, they are well coached, they play a pace that is ideal for the postseason and their leaders, Brown and Jackson have plenty of Playoff seasoning. Don't underestimate the kinds of crowd the Bobcats could attract in a series either. Charlotte was a great pro basketball town for years when the Hornets were there. A return to the postseason could very well revitalize the city's support for NBA hoops and turn the usually staid Time-Warner Cable Arena into a madhouse. We saw the kind of devastating affect a match-up and coaching edge, an underdog's confidence and a raucous crowd can have on a 1-8 series three years ago, when the Warriors stunned the Mavericks.

Of course, they have to get there first. Right now the Bobcats are 30-31, a half-game behind Chicago for the eighth position. The bottom half of the East race is sardine-packed- two-and-a-half games separate the fifth-place Bucks from the ninth-place Bobcats- and things are still fluid. Charlotte could finish in the seventh, sixth or even fifth positions, with bad match-ups against Orlando, Boston or Atlanta (against whom the Cats are a combined 1-7.) Or they could miss the Playoffs altogether. The way things are going Charlotte's make-or-break game might be the second-to-last of the season at New Jersey… which is 2-1 against the Bobcats.

It’s no shame to admit when an opponent, even a lesser opponent, has your number. Charlotte has Cleveland’s number. The Cavaliers can beat this team in a series. They *should* beat them. And if they meet, perhaps they will beat them. But it’ll take every break, every stop and every drop of greatness from LeBron James to do it, if it comes to that. The best thing to hope for is that Charlotte stays home for the spring. Why take a chance?