The 2009-2010 Cleveland Cavaliers approach the summit of greatness. Despite the best record in the league, however, they cannot make that claim quite yet.

Today, after winning 60 of 82 regular-season games, they are merely “pretty damned good” -- just as they were last season when they won 66 games. But there exist some very real and very discernible differences between this team and last season’s.

To make the leap from “pretty damned good” to “great,” the Cavaliers must win at least one NBA championship, an elusive feat that they appear entirely capable of accomplishing for the first time in their 40-year history.

It has been said that the key ingredients to winning a championship are four: talent, desire, hard work and luck.

1) Talent.

Start with the best player, bar none, on the planet. In recent seasons, LeBron James has played stellar basketball. Last season, he even won the MVP title. And this season, he's a slam-dunk (forgive the trite expression) favorite to repeat.

Turn your attention now to two newer additions to the roster: center Shaquille O'Neal and forward Antawn Jamison. O'Neal provides some much-needed defense, rebounding and bulk in the key, while Jamison is an all-star-caliber scorer and not a bad defender. Though they've got quite a few miles on their sneakers, both are capable of scoring 20 points and hauling down 10 rebounds or more on any given night. And they are quite an upgrade over last year's combo of Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Andy Varejao/Ben Wallace (no disrespect, guys).

In the backcourt, the hope is that Mo Williams doesn't flame out again when the playoffs start and that Delonte West will be able to contribute to the team's championship push following his court appearance on April 26th (yes, fans, it's coming -- soon). Anthony Parker was added in the off-season for his length and defense. Frankly, he's not scored a lot of points, but he's a fairly steady performer who can hit a jumper every once in a while.

Finally, the bench. Ilgauskas, Varejao and West are the first line of substitutes, and any of those three could be starters for many teams. J.J. Hickson, the second-year player who proved himself in Shaq's absence, provides speed and jumping ability. And there is simply no comparison between the rest of this year's back-ups (Jamario Moon, Jawad Williams, Boobie Gibson, Leon Powe) and last year's now-forgotten bunch (Joe Smith, Sasha Pavlovic, Wally Szczerbiak, Darnell Jackson).

This is a team with just one apparent weakness: free-throw shooting, which certainly could come back to haunt them at some point in the hotly-contested playoffs but is not necessarily a fatal flaw.

2) Desire.

LeBron is coming off a lengthy rest. This weekend, he could well roar onto the court like a tiger that's been caged for a week and post some truly gigantic numbers. Maybe forty-five points. Maybe a monstrous triple-double. But something grand. He, in a surprisingly humble way, wants to walk in the same clouds that Michael Jordan once lived, and he's not about to let anything get in his way.

Shaq, meanwhile, wants to win "one for the thumb." We know; he told us so when Danny Ferry signed him. Jamison and Williams, despite stellar careers so far, have never been on teams that have won anything worth writing home about, so you've got to figure that they, too, lust after greatness.

And there's nobody on the team or in the front office that doesn't believe that LeBron will re-up with the Cavs if they win a championship. As the perennial all-star is seeking a Jordanesque "legacy," with an NBA championship this season, he will realize that his quest for multiple championships most likely resides in Cleveland rather than with a rebuilding team like the Knicks or Nets. That's impetus enough for the entire team (not to mention the entire town) to be jacked up about the playoffs.

Last year, six months of success were spoiled in little over a week by Orlando, a disappointment that has not been forgotten by anyone associated with the team back then. This group is hungry, no doubt, and there could be hell to pay in May and June.

3) Hard work.

What ordinary fan can tell you that the Cavs have out-worked any other NBA team? Nobody, because we are barred from practice sessions, where the hardest work is done. But we as fans can make the astute observation that they've turned over three-fifths of last year's starting lineup and added Jamison at the trade deadline, and they haven't missed a beat. Not one beat. That points to a lot more than…

4) Luck.

Shaq was brought in for one purpose: to body up on Orlando's Dwight Howard and Los Angeles' Andrew Bynum and/or Pau Gasol in the playoffs, if necessary. Six weeks ago, he suffered a finger injury that needed surgery. But -- faith and begorra -- he's apparently ready to return, just in time for the playoffs. And he's shed 20 pounds to boot.

Barely two months ago, Ilgauskas was traded to Washington for Jamison. At the time, the Cavs had to bid a fond farewell to their most faithful and endearing player, not knowing whether he'd opt to return to the club ever again. However, thanks to a quirk in the NBA rules, Big Z was able (and chose) to return just in time to get some PT under his belt before the playoffs begin.

Last week, Jamison himself tweaked his ankle. But, thankfully, it was just a tweak, so he's also at full throttle for the playoffs.

As luck would have it, then, the Cavaliers open the "second season" healthy and raring to go. Now, if they can just avoid any Cleveland Curses throughout the playoffs, their potential is virtually limitless.

Just Steps Away

Last year, most of TheClevelandFan.com writers (including yours truly) predicted that the Cavs would win the NBA championship. One writer (who shall remain nameless, but his initials are J.R.) said they'd win because it was their "destiny." Admittedly, that was an ill-advised prognostication, based more on wishful thinking than an accurate assessment of the team. This season, none other than Sir Charles Barkley and most of the rest of NBA-dom predict that the Larry O'Brien Trophy will come to Cleveland, based on more accurate assessments than simply "destiny."

It's hard to believe that this year's team possesses so much more talent than any previous year. But it's an ultra-deep roster that can play almost any style necessary, given whatever match-ups and in-game situations arise. When healthy, they've pretty much dominated the better teams in the league (Los Angeles, Orlando and Boston).

These 2009-2010 Cleveland Cavaliers approach the summit of greatness. Four other teams with equally grandiose expectations stand in their way. Just a few more giant but challenging steps up the mountain remain.