One of my favorite NBA quotes - in pseudo-recent history - was in the summer of 2006, when then-New York Knick Nate Robinson ripped his then-departing coach Larry Brown for taking away his "joy."

He told the *"New York Post"*:

"Coach Brown is so old-school. He want everything done just like this, not getting the crowd involved. Isiah [Thomas] wants everyone to have fun.

"At first [Brown] was trying to take my joy away . . . 'don't do this, don't do that.' At the same time I had people in my corner saying 'Don't change who you are. You got here by being Nate Robinson.'"

I love that. A lot. For some reason, the idea of Larry Brown robbing Nate Robinson of his "joy" just gets me. It still makes me laugh. Especially now that we know how that "everyone having fun" mantra played out in New York with Isiah and Nate . . . both of whom, of course, are no longer around.

I bring this up now - almost four years later - because of something I thought about in the latter stages of the Cleveland Cavaliers' first round playoff match-up with the Chicago Bulls:

The Cavs just aren't playing with any joy.

And I'm being serious. It's something that has been a significant part of their make-up for the past two years, at least . . . ever since LeBron James has been surrounded with enough talent to play solid, legitimate, and often dominant *team basketball*.

LeBron has been credited with setting the *fun* tone. His love and enjoyment of the game, his trust in his teammates, his excitement for their individual and collective successes, and his general playfulness and relaxed nature have created what appears to be the best team environment in the NBA. And maybe even in professional sports.

It's on- and off-the-court chemistry. It's *off-the-charts* chemistry.

Last year, there were pre-game antics . . . the picture-taking and whatnot . . . and this year, there's the " goosenecks ," plus the elaborate personalized handshakes, and as always, the bench's notorious in-game cheerleading.

During the regular season . . . in any random game of varying significance or insignificance . . . the Cleveland bench is visibly engaged in the game at all times. They pay close attention to the game, they leap up and dance whenever something exciting happens, and they usually jump up and walk out to congratulate their teammates as they're coming back to the bench at a timeout.

In fact, before this season, the NBA warned teams to keep their bench . . . *on the bench*. Although the Association didn't publicly call the Cavs out, it seemed directed toward them. Last season, the bench would regularly stand for long stretches during pivotal moments of the game, always prepared to explode the second the Cavs made a huge offensive or defensive play. (Well, Tarence Kinsey was prepared to explode, at least.)

[Under the new "guidelines," the players can still react to what's happening on the court, but they aren't supposed to stand while the game is going on . . . because it blocks the view of the

seated fans in the expensive seats.]

This anti-standing "movement" was apparently spearheaded by a Chicago Bulls beat writer, who *did* call out the Cavs in particular for their "jerk"-ish, view-blocking behavior.

Speaking of Chicago, fast-forward into the season, to a Cavs game against the Bulls at The Q in December. In that one, LeBron was playfully dancing around all night . . . and it got under the skin of Joakim Noah, who began jawing at LeBron from the Bulls bench because he, apparently, wasn't a fan. A few words and glares were exchanged, but in the end, it was just a case of the Bulls being frustrated.

But throughout the Cavs' playoff series against the Bulls . . . there wasn't a lot of smiling and there definitely wasn't much dancing. The Cavs were in serious mode, and that's OK. It's playoff basketball, and it's time to buckle up and get down to business.

Only the Cavaliers seemed reluctant to do any business. In fact, they didn't even seem all that interested in the games they were playing. It was as if there was some other main event somewhere . . . and these pesky battles with the Bulls were merely a sideshow.

Cleveland may have walked away from the series 4-1, but they were lucky it didn't drag out any more. The Cavs weren't at the top of their game . . . and aside from sporadic moments in Games 1, 4 and 5, it wasn't the most exciting entertainment to watch as a Cavs fan.

That's when I started thinking: Maybe the Cavs are too tightly wound. Maybe it wasn't that they weren't taking the Bulls seriously . . . maybe it was that they were taking them (or the playoffs as a whole) *too* seriously.

Right when the playoffs started, I remember reading an article by ESPN's Chris Broussard called "Cavs Focused Like Never Before" . . . and in it, Broussard talked about how the whole team was adopting a more solemn, serious tone. Shaquille O'Neal was reportedly leading the way in this change in approach, perspective and focus.

Well, clearly something happened from then until now. It's not worth hypothesizing, since focus can come and go. It can be easily lost and found . . . like keys, or Mo Williams' shot. But

regardless, maybe that isn't the best approach. At least right now.

Think about it.

For players like LeBron and Shaq, the steely-eyed, super intense and serious demeanor can be very comfortable and empowering. Other veterans, like Antawn Jamison, Zydrunas Ilgauskas, Anthony Parker, Anderson Varejao (defensively only) and Delonte West (defensively only) can also feed off this vibe.

But for others, no matter how locked-in they are, this approach might just be needlessly stressing. It might just be too much . . . especially with a superstar on the floor with them. A superstar that needs to win and is no longer joking around.

It might scare them into deferring to LeBron *even more* than they already do, it might suffocate their freedom to experiment and create, it might make them feel uncomfortable and unsure . . . it might make them feel like they're walking on pins and needles, while carrying a Fabergé egg.

[In other words, it might make them appear worse than they are. Cavs fans know that LeBron has had a pretty impressive supporting cast this season . . . exponentially better than what we've seen in the playoffs.]

This list includes: Mo Williams, Anderson Varejao (especially offensively), Delonte West (especially offensively), J.J. Hickson, Jamario Moon and the forgotten Daniel Gibson.

It sounds like this would be bad . . . that these players can't step up in big games or can't be clutch. That's not necessarily the case though. These players just seem more prone to have bigger impacts within a slightly more relaxed, loose style of play. And in moments that can't be "loose," these players . . . which can be more up and down emotionally . . . can step up to make "sense of the moment" plays.

Take Daniel Gibson: If there were five seconds before halftime, and I needed a three-pointer to close a gap to single-digits . . . I would not bring Boobie off the bench to take that shot. He'll have a 20% chance of making it, at best. But in another situation, if he were playing (scoring *or not*
) while the Cavs were making a thrilling comeback to close a game, and needed someone to take a three to win the game with five seconds left . . . I would make sure that's Boobie's shot. He'll have an 80% chance of drilling it.

Yeah, I know, if Boobie's hitting 80% of anything he's not on the bench. It was for a point. But then again, he *is* on the bench, and he finished third in the NBA in 3-point shooting. So there you go.

OK, so how do you bring more "joy" to the Cavaliers? Especially when they're not playing well . . . like most of the first two games of the Boston series.

I don't know. I'm just a writer.

LeBron knows every guy on the team personally and professionally . . . off the court and on it. He understands what makes them tick . . . what buttons to push to get them going. That's part of the reason he's such a great teammate, and a lot of the reason he spends time trying to get them going early in games.

If he wanted to relax the solemn, serious tone around the team a little . . . which again, is typically appropriate for a team on a quest for its first championship . . . I think he could do it while building on any sense of urgency that is there.

Generally, it could be picking up the tempo, having the ball pushed up the court, encouraging teammates to run the floor, enforcing that the ball be passed from one side to the other in the half-court, challenging guys to find creative ways of getting Shaq the ball . . . if that's what they're going to do . . . or basically, starting a one-upping competition for finding / creating open shots for teammates.

And elbow issue or not, LeBron should also make sure everyone is on the same page: That the ball doesn't need to go through him . . . if a shot is there without him "resetting" everything up top, it needs to be taken. Maybe relinquishing some control to his teammates would even free him up to do some more off-the-ball work/decoying.

On the defensive end, that's where the "All Together" or "One for All" (or whatever slogan Cleveland is using) comes into play. LeBron (and the coaching staff) should instill a cocky mentality on that end of the floor. They need to preach that every ounce of effort will help seal holes . . . every help move will fortify walls . . . and every time someone gets a hand on the ball, or in someone's face, it should be recognized. The Cavs should be taking pride in their defensive effort again . . . not taking it for granted and/or expecting to be able to turn on a "switch" when needed.

Even if the Cavs aren't up by 10 or 15 points, a sense of pride, individual confidence and team trust could keep the loose, "joy". Even if it's the playoffs, they could be allowing themselves to have fun on the court. And even if they're down by 10, they can know that they're just about to make their pounce.

Maybe all this is stupid.

Playoff intensity should be "tough" . . . but at least for now, it's just not working for the Cavaliers. Not much is. So, at least while they're finding their groove, maybe they could just have some fun on the floor. At least that way, they'd be much more enjoyable to watch.

By sheer talent alone the Cavaliers are believed to be superior to the Celtics. Yes, Boston is definitely a very real adversary, but maybe the Cavs are tripping over their own feet a lot.

If Mo wasn't worried about compensating for his failures in the game before . . . if J.J. wasn't over-thinking scouting reports . . . if Andy knew whether LeBron wanted him to take that 15-footer (psst, he doesn't) . . . if West knew he should take the initiative to take the ball to the basket (and do something totally awesome) . . . if Jamario knew we were appreciative of his hustle . . .

Maybe the talent would be uncorked, and pour.

The Cavs need to play better. Win or lose. And personally, I think they need to go back to having fun. Because this serious stuff just isn't them right now.

[By the way, I'm curious about the kidnapped or not-kidnapped state of Nate Robinson's joy right now. He's on a good team in the playoffs . . . finally . . . but in two games he's only played a total of 40 seconds. That's less than the 1:14 that Daniel Gibson has received. Shoot, Boobie, Shoot!]