Barely two minutes into the second quarter of Tuesday's night's game against the Boston Celtics, the Cleveland Cavaliers held a 29-21 lead. Eight minutes later the Cavs still had 29 points put the Celtics now had 37. It was that brutal, sloppy mess of a stretch that effectively sealed the fate of a the Cavs, a group of better players butting heads against a better team.

With just about everyone now writing the Cavs epitaph for a season that once held such promise and is now collapsing around them like a house of cards, it also will be that eight minute stretch that will define what went wrong overall.

It started innocently enough. After Mo Williams made a jump shot with 9:53 remaining in the quarter to push the lead to 29-21, the Celtics called time out. It was coach Doc Rivers' best coaching moment of the season. Out of that time out, Paul Pierce attempted a layup that was blocked by Zydrunas Ilgauskas. Ray Allen grabbed the rebound and the put back brought the Celtics to within 6.

Williams them missed a jump shot on the Cavs next possession. There was 9:14 remaining. It would be nearly a minute before they could get off another shot, a Shaquille O'Neal half-hearted hook shot that was rebounded by Kevin Garnett. It would be two more minutes before the Cavs could get off their next shot, a Williams miss. Three possessions later LeBron James missed a 3-pointer. Four possessions later Antwan Jamison missed a layup. James finally broke the ice 5 more possessions later by making two free throws.

In between all that silliness, there were turnovers galore and ridiculous fouls. The Cavs were literally imploding in front of a worldwide audience and there was nothing that seemingly could be done about it.

James, inexplicably, was passive throughout. Content to distribute the ball in what can only be described as a botched attempt to control the flow of the game, James sucked the life out of both himself and his teammates with perhaps one of the most passive performances of his career, especially considering what was at stake.

Tuesday night's loss was like watching air slowing escape from an overinflated balloon. It may not have been the most important game of the season, that would be this Thursday's, but it was the second most important anyway. And yet the Cavs were flat and listless as if they were playing their fourth game in five nights on the road in Sacramento. They looked like the Ohio State Buckeyes used to look against Michigan when John Cooper was the head coach.

Meanwhile in his post game press conference James calmly explained that he wasn't worried. The team's back was against the wall, sure, but there was still room to breath. It's probably good that he wasn't in full panic mode, but the fans certainly were. Maybe that's because he knows what his future holds and the fans don't.

It was hard to read James in that interview. On the one hand his calmness in the midst of what most fans would consider a shit-storm is exactly the right trait you'd want a leader to have at exactly that moment. And yet you couldn't help but also read into it an indifference, almost an aloofness that has seemed to represent his on-court demeanor during these past two games, both embarrassing losses.

During a halftime interview on Friday evening, after James had put together an otherwordly first half to essentially send the Celtics to an early loss, James talked about how he understands full well that his teammates feed off his energy and approach. And yet these past two games, and especially Tuesday night, James acted as if he was just another bit part, standing around like the rest of his teammates waiting for someone else to take the controls of this runaway train. No one did.

Maybe James is just tired. Maybe all of the time and effort he puts into his game has left him tired and weary. Maybe the weight of the decisions he faces about his future are wearing on him more than he can even admit to himself. Maybe it's just a Celtics team playing the best defense of their lives. Whatever it is, though, James is clearly not the same person most fans are used to seeing.

There's little spark and command at the moment. He's become just another Austin Powers in search of his mojo but in no particular hurry to find it.

Then it occurred to me that perhaps what James is finally beginning to understand is what most fans of Cleveland sports already believe: you can't win a championship in this town. The Cavs

under owner Dan Gilbert and general manager Danny Ferry have spared no expense in loading this team with more firepower than any other team in the league. And yet the Cavs now find themselves regressing. The better the players the worse the results.

It wouldn't be unreasonable for James to have concluded that it just isn't going to happen in this town, ever. That's what the fans were thinking anyway as they watched their latest best chance at an elusive championship slip through their fingers once again.

Last season the Cavs lost a tough series in the Eastern Conference finals against the Orlando Magic mainly because they didn't match up well against the Magic. The Cavs addressed that in the off season with the acquisition of O'Neal. Now they find themselves on the verge of being eliminated in the Eastern Conference semi-finals not by a team that presents particularly difficult match ups but by a team that executes better and is far more focused.

Perhaps that's what's both so frustrating and revealing about this moment in time. The Cavs know they are a very talented group. But like the brilliant kid in class who ends up with “Cs” on his report card, they seem to take it all for granted. Meanwhile the less brilliant among them are working harder and paying attention to all the little things necessary to be successful.

The Cavs are being outplayed by the Celtics in every meaningful category. The Celtics are committing less turnovers, dishing out more assists, grabbing far more offensive rebounds and committing less turnovers. More importantly, though, almost across the board, from field goal percentage to rebounds to blocked shots, the Celtics have performed better in the playoffs than the regular seasons. Except for free throw percentage and block shots, the Cavs have regressed from their regular season averages.

It's not even so much a question of blame so much as it is a question of responsibility. This Cavs team is made up of veterans who should have a complete appreciation for the pressure of the playoffs and all the bump and grind that goes with them. Yet when it matters most, these same players, including James have actually turned it down a notch as if they were worried that the pot on the stove would boil over and cause a mess.

If Tuesday night turns out to be James' last game in a Cavs uniform, which I still doubt, it will represent the biggest failure in his professional life, perhaps his entire basketball life. This city, this region counted on the Chosen One to finally deliver a championship that so many around here so desperately need and he didn't deliver, not even close.

If James does leave, I have no doubt that there will be championships in his future. He'll use this failure as the catalyst to the next phase of a career that will remain brilliant. But as usual it won't be in a hometown uniform. That's the way it works around here. Art Modell, as despicable of a Cleveland sports figure as ever existed, managed to win a championship once he left town. Almost any good player that once played for the Indians seems to have done likewise once they left. Now we're left to ponder for the next few months anyway whether that's our fate once again.

There is still a way for James to salvage something out of this wreck. Sometime before game

six he could drop it casually into his next interview that no matter what happens he will be in Cleveland next year and for years to come. It would take the pressure off both James and his teammates. It would re-energize both the team and the fans at exactly the right moment. In short, it would be a brilliant move. But this is Cleveland and that's why it won't happen. Those kinds of things never do.