The national sportswriting fraternity is calling Game 5 “weird,” “confounding” and “strange.”

Cavalier fans are crying for LeBron James’s head on a platter.

New York basketball fans are crowing that LeBron will soon lead the Knicks to an NBA championship.

Here’s what ESPN’s Chris Sheridan observed about Tuesday night’s pitiful loss to the Boston Celtics:

“[LeBron] seemed tentative, hesitant, de-energized, confused and oh, so human. He didn’t seem overly distressed or disturbed by the predicament he and his team now find themselves in. It was all kind of just too weird.”

There are two possible explanations -- and only two -- for LeBron’s disappointing performance in the 32-point loss to Boston.

(1) LeBron’s ailing elbow is causing him more pain than he admits.

Anyone who's ever played basketball knows that you can still be effective on the court with minor pains. Once the adrenalin starts flowing and once your mind is focused on making a fool of the guy guarding you, the pain goes away.

But there is a point where the pain becomes so excruciating that not even the thrill of high-level competition will erase it.

This, I surmise, is where LeBron's elbow is today. I cannot say for certain, but his recent performances point toward an injury that is causing him more concern than he lets on.

Hey, look: LeBron is the most talented basketball player in the universe. He has proven it in the past with performances that have transcended greatness. It was just three years ago that he had one of the most sublime individual performances in sports history during a playoff victory over then-potent Detroit.

"James refuses to acknowledge that his right elbow is hindering his performance, but it's difficult to believe he's completely healthy," writes Gary Washburn of the *Boston Globe*. "Last night, there were times he wanted nothing to do with scoring or spearheading a comeback."

I don't believe it is a coincidence that LeBron's one spectacular game in this series came after a four-day layoff, giving his elbow time to heal. But because playoff games are generally two days apart, if his elbow is bothering him enough to bring him back to the realm of human, even if the Cavs somehow beat the Celtics twice in a row, the injury does not bode well for the rest of the playoffs.

(2) LeBron is mentally not up to the challenge of playing a Boston team that is at the top of its game.

This is a theory that I do not subscribe to, but it's being bandied about in certain circles.

"The very same things that make James so appealing off the court -- a quick smile, level head, easy-going demeanor -- seem to holding back his progress on it," wrote Jim Litke of the *Boston Herald* .
"The only thing James appears to have learned is how to lose the games that matter most."

Tim Legler of ESPN checked in with this: "It was a very, very strange performance. This was a guy who was just not in there mentally when the team needed him most. To go down without playing your game so that everyone else on the roster can settle into their comfort zone, he did not seize that responsibility."

The New York media is also suggesting that LeBron's heart might not be in Cleveland, that he might be looking ahead to the day this summer when he signs a big contract with the Knicks or Nets and continues his quest to become a world-renowned billionaire.

Given his love for his hometown of Akron and his love for the Cleveland fans (yes, even those who booed him Tuesday night), it's hard to believe that LeBron isn't giving the game everything he's got -- especially because he knows NBA history and knows that the greatest players perform the greatest feats when they are thrust into the national spotlight by the playoffs.

It's Not All LeBron

Because one player can make such a huge difference in a basketball team's fortunes -- as LeBron has done -- we sometimes forget that it's a team sport. LeBron is not the only Cavalier who's letting us down.

If LeBron's teammates realize that his elbow is affecting his game, they should take the responsibility of elevating their games. But -- aside from brief glimpses of Shaquille O'Neal (in Game 5) and Mo Williams (in Game 1) -- it's just not happening. These guys are simply not earning their paychecks -- perhaps the major reason that team owner Dan Gilbert left Quicken Loans arena Tuesday night with a big scowl on his face.

Finally, there's the coaching.

"[Mike] Brown appears out of ideas," wrote the *Globe*'s Washburn. "Save for a couple of decent starts the past two games, the Cavaliers have been lifeless, and Brown is taking most of the blame. Doc Rivers is baffling him with his coaching adjustments, and the coaching competition is so lopsided [that] Brown's reputation has been damaged. He has no idea what to do with Rondo."

Though I'm not a sports psychologist, there also appears to be some dissention in the clubhouse. Its genesis I know not. If such is the case, it's totally out of character for this team, which seemed to take so much joy in playing the game during the regular season. Lack of enthusiasm and, subsequently, effort, is a malady that the best head coaches seem able to surmount, but the gloom that has been cast over this team's psyche is lingering just a little too long for there to be any hope that they will snap out of it before the Celtics send them home.

My Crystal Ball

"There is something fundamentally wrong with this team's blasé response to the biggest games of the season," wrote Ian Thomsen of SportsIllustrated/CNN.com.

I'm not putting it past the Cavaliers to chuck all the valid criticism, to tighten their belts, and to rally for two straight victories over the Celtics. It can be done, and has been done before. Basketball is a funny game.

But they can't do it playing like they've played in Games 1, 2, 4 and 5. No way.