There's only one word for sports fans like me: masochists. My latest journey into the realm of self-flagellation was re-watching Game 5 of the Cavaliers-Celtics playoff series -- viewed by most as the turning point in the series -- when the Celtics cleaned the Cavs' clock at the Q, 120-88. It was a dagger in our hearts.

At the beginning of the game, the series was tied, 2-2, even though Rajon Rondo had turned in a monstrous effort in Game 4. By the end of the Game 5, the Celtics had taken a commanding 3-2 lead; they'd re-established the ability to beat the Cavs at the Q; and they'd gained the all-important momentum advantage going back to Boston.

I undertook this detestable exercise to observe any indications that LeBron (dubbed "LeQuit" in many circles) might not have given a full effort. Last week, I heard LeBron's "killer mentality" negatively contrasted to Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird and Isiah Thomas. But LeBron doesn't have the supporting expertise of head coaches like Phil Jackson, Pat Riley, Tom Heinsohn or Bill Fitch, either. (So now you know where this article is headed.)

If you wish to rehash with me, you will see that there really is no basis upon which to criticize LeBron's effort. His performance, yes; but not his effort.

The simple answer to LBJ's rather pathetic showing in this particular game is that his jump shot was not falling and a tenacious Boston took away any thoughts of driving to the hole. Here are some clues as to how it was plainly evident that LeBron WAS giving his best effort:

1) Early in the first quarter, LeBron skied over both Kevin Garnett and Kendrick Perkins for an offensive rebound. Absolutely *skied*.

2) The photo accompanying this article shows, on one early possession, how the Celtics removed all possibilities that LeBron would drive to the hoop. As you can see, the Celts have all five men between LeBron (yellow circle) and the basket. Paul Pierce is taking away the baseline and Rasheed Wallace and Garnett are positioned to easily back up Pierce. Such was the case almost all night.

3) On defense, LeBron held the always-dangerous Pierce to 9 of 21 from the field.

4) With 9:54 left in the second period, LeBron out-raced everyone on a 2-on-2 fast break with Mo Williams. The Cavs guard hit a mid-range jumper while LeBron, not giving up on the play, jockeyed with the bulky Kendrick Perkins for rebounding position.

No, it was not a lack of effort. It was more an injured elbow that was really bothering him (as I theorized in this space last week):

1) With 2:11 left in the first quarter, while transitioning from offense to defense, he appeared to be rubbing the elbow for no apparent reason. Later in the period, during a break in the action, he again rubbed it.

2) He was 0 of 4 in three-point attempts, and all four of the misses were short. Most of his other jumpers also clanked off the front of the iron, a sure indication that he might not have been able to fully extend the shooting elbow.

3) Courtside TV commentator Mike Fratello: “If you go back to the first 20 minutes of play in this game, how many jump shots can you remember LeBron taking? I’m wondering if that elbow is any kind of a problem, where he’s more comfortable driving and slashing as opposed to shooting jump shots.”

A Failed Team

Here's what I saw from the team as a whole:

1) An overall lack of attention to detail, including no white jerseys--especially the guards--blocking their men away from the boards. That was compounded by too many careless ball-handling mistakes--known in tennis parlance as "unforced errors."

2) Some terrible personnel mismatches, including Antawn Jamison on Garnett and Mo Williams on Rondo.

3) A lack of hustle that enabled the Celtics to hold a commanding margin in gaining possession of "50-50" balls.

4) Lack of bench production. When your whole offense is based on one man initiating it, and that man is hobbled or not on the court, the offense has a rather predictable tendency to deteriorate--if not completely collapse--in the face of a smothering defense like the Celts'.

A Failed Head Coach

All season long, there was never a doubt that the Cavaliers had the personnel to beat any team in the league in a seven-game series. Every expert in the world agreed. But it was clear throughout this fateful series that head coach Mike Brown (who obviously was not able to determine where his team could take advantage of the Celtics) was being badly out-coached by Doc Rivers (who took advantage of every mismatch and every failed move that Brown made).

Ever since he came to Cleveland, Brown has not placed any value whatsoever on offensive continuity. When the Cavs would get beat 88-75, or 91-89, Brown would focus on how the team failed on defense rather than on offense.

You need to look no further than the case of Antawn Jamison to see an example of the many questionable coaching decisions made during this series. Jamison is a scoring machine when used properly. But very few actual plays were called for him. And he was matched up on defense with Garnett, which further hampered his ability to contribute offensively. As a result, poor Antawn was ineffective on both ends of the court. If Brown had a clue, he would've put Andy Varejao in the starting lineup to check Garnett and then insert Jamison when Garnett took a breather. It's not rocket science, kiddies.

Another example is how Brown, since he arrived, has allowed LeBron to continue to dictate all facets of the offense when incredible talent elsewhere on the court and on the bench is finally available. True, this move has probably been done to placate LBJ more than anything else--but who's the head coach here?

Quoting a Friend

TCF.com colleague Erik Cassano had some insightful observations on one of our message boards late last week. In case you missed them, I bow to Eric by quoting him here:

One thing I'm certain of is that the Cavs are way too reliant on LeBron as an organizational foundation.

The Cavs have been kissing LeBron's ass and catering to his every whim for seven years, believing that all of the New York flirting and diva-acting will be worth it when he brings home the NBA title. But they've turned him from the best player on the team to something in the neighborhood of Lord and Savior. When he craps out, the flaws in how the Cavs have deified LBJ are exposed in a truly glaring fashion. The whole organization turns to Swiss cheese.

The End, 2009-2010

Let's face it, fans: The Cavaliers just lost a "perfect storm" of a playoff series with their MVP

nowhere near 100% physically, against a veteran, playoff-tested, determined, healthy opponent that laid some incredible defense on them.

Since their elimination, the Cavs (and LeBron) have a lot of important decisions to make. I, for one, would like to see the entire team remain intact for another go-round with a more veteran head coach who can use the available personnel to their utmost advantage. It would be fascinating to see the difference that such a change might make.

In the end, what transpired last week was NOT a lack of on-court effort between the endlines by ANYONE in wine-and-gold, including--perhaps especially--LeBron James.