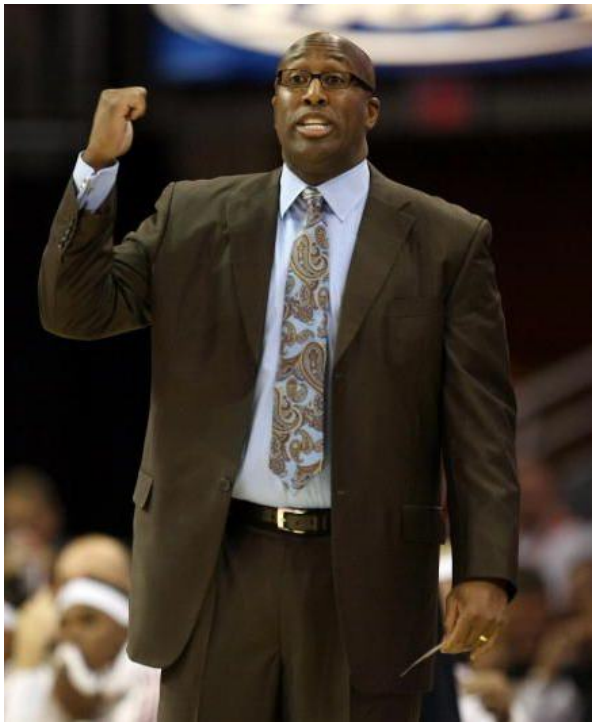

The first real casualty of the failed Cleveland Cavaliers season has finally been identified and it is as expected, head coach Mike Brown.

It's not much of a surprise Brown was fired because we live in a society where everything bad that happens has to be someone's fault. And when someone's at fault, heads have to roll. It certainly makes us feel better, as if somehow our own souls are purged when someone else loses his job. We can be pretty cavalier with other people's livelihoods, can't we?

And yet why do I still have the nagging feeling that of all the Cleveland head coaches over the years that deserved to be fired, Brown doesn't even make the top 10?

Brown's record, 272-138 speaks for itself. Of course, so does his playoff record of 42-29, which isn't awful but which included just one NBA Finals (where the Cavs were swept by the San Antonio Spurs) and two very bitter disappointments in the last two years. And as the saying goes, it's always easier to fire the coach than the whole team.

What we're never likely to know in all of this is the real story behind why Brown was fired. Was he a hard-headed coach who couldn't learn from his mistakes? Did he lose the confidence of a

team even after getting it to the NBA's best record this past season (and the season before that)? Is this somehow intertwined with LeBron James' apparent need to find more fame and more fortune elsewhere?

Before we bury Brown in the graveyard of Cleveland coaches and move on to the next victim in line, pause at least to admit that Brown accomplished far more with James than Flip Saunders was ever able to accomplish with Kevin Garnett in Minnesota and Saunders lasted essentially twice as long with the Timberwolves as Brown did with the Cavs.

Consider, for example, that with Saunders and Garnett the Timberwolves won 50 games or more only 4 times in 10 seasons. Their best record in that time was 58-24. With Brown and James, the Cavs won at least 50 games in four of five seasons and in two of those seasons they won more than 60 games. In the 2007-08 season, the Cavs went 45-37, which was better than 5 different seasons that Garnett was in Minnesota.

The point I think is that those who would simply dismiss Brown's record as an anomaly brought about by the presence of James fail to appreciate that so much more goes into having a winning team than just having one of the top two or three players in the league. It takes a capable head coach, someone far more capable than Saunders, for example, to win a lot of games.

Whatever James feels about Brown at the moment, James has to realize that it was Brown that brought James to this point. It's one of those interesting debates that never gets resolved but it's not hard to imagine James still waiting for his first Most Valuable Player trophy if not for the ability of Brown to take James' game to the next level.

In the last few seasons James has emerged as one of the best defenders in the league but it certainly wasn't always that way. James was never a defensive disaster like Mo Williams can be, but he was far from a finished product. James has had the benefit of working under two defensive minded head coaches in Brown and Paul Silas, but it was Brown far more than Silas that convinced James that the path of greatness could only be navigated if one is a complete player.

James is now that and more. I suspect, though, that in the rush to applaud the firing of Brown the focus will be far too much on the team's most recent failure and not on Brown's overall body

of work.

I'm not suggesting that the decision Dan Gilbert ultimately made to fire Brown was wrong. It's just that it's far more complicated of an analysis than most want to acknowledge. In the press release announcing the firing, Gilbert acknowledged that Browns' firing carried an element of risk but he nonetheless concluded that it was a risk worth taking in order to get the team to a higher level.

The last time I heard that kind of rationale, Mark Shapiro was firing Mike Hargrove and bringing in Eric Wedge. I doubt that's the kind of switch out that Gilbert contemplates but that's just the kind of risk a decision like this carries.

It's a funny thing about these amorphous higher levels. You can tell when an individual achieves them but for teams it's much harder. Whether or not they really even exist is a matter of opinion but most of the time they end up being reached as much out of luck as anything else.

James' status, of course, complicates the replacement scenario greatly unless the Cavs already have concluded that James is gone. While the rumor mill has been in overdrive for the last two weeks, it is best to remember that most of those fueling that beast are those with a vested interest—professional talkers, people associated with other teams, that sort of thing.

Still it would be easy to reach that conclusion that James is gone by parsing his own words carefully. The problem for the Cavs is that it would be public relations suicide to acknowledge as much and start actually positioning the organization now for life post-James. They have no effective choice but to wait until it's too late.

Thus the Cavs are probably going to be stuck in some sort of organizational limbo until James makes it official which likely means that about this time next year Gilbert is going to have to explain how one giant leap backward really is part of the plan of moving two giant leaps forward.

Meanwhile, the firing of Brown probably also solidifies Danny Ferry's role as general manager. Those who wanted Brown gone can't then lay the blame at Ferry for the collapse. Either you

think Brown deserved to be fired because he didn't do enough with the talent Ferry obtained or you think Ferry didn't do a good enough job getting the talent and thus Brown was hamstrung. But both principles can't co-exist.

If forced to choose which is more true than the other, you have to side with Ferry. Look at it this way, you could put James on the New Jersey Nets right now and not change a thing and that team isn't going to win 60 games even if Phil Jackson is the head coach.

Ferry has done marvelous work winding his way through the various loopholes and intricacies of the league's byzantine-like salary cap and found enough talent to get this team to 270+ wins in five season. Kevin McHale, his counterpart in Minnesota for most of Garnett's tenure, needed almost two more seasons, that's 164 more games, to win as many.

In all likelihood, while both Brown and Ferry can't be simultaneously responsible for an institutional collapse they both can be simultaneously responsible for making the Cavs one of the best teams in the league and that's what really has occurred. Now the question is whether or not Ferry and someone else can move beyond the lofty perches already in place. If not, then in about 5 years or so (maybe less), the Cavs will be bumping Ferry into the role of team president, one of his underlings will be the new general manager and the Cavs will be hiring their version of Manny Acta. And as fans all we'll be able to say, once again, is that we've seen this movie before.