May 4, 2011: Miami, Fla.

Cavs 115, Heat 112 (OT)

Cleveland wins series, 4-3.

Admit it, you saw this coming. Yes, it was a 1-seed with a 69-13 record playing an 8-seed with a 43-39 record that required an 8-2 finish to even get that high. But as much as your inner Clevelander didn't want to admit that you saw this coming, you did.

It was probably during Game 3 when LeBron James tried to dunk on Ryan Hollins yet again.

Hollins filled in admirably when Anderson Varejao re-injured his already-ailing ankle in Game 1, effectively ending his involvement in the series. But LeBron tried repeatedly to make sure Hollins knew his journeyman place in the league's pecking order, by repeatedly driving at Hollins and scoring on him. LeBron threw down a series of particularly vicious dunks on Hollins during Miami's victories in Games 1 and 2.

By Game 3, Hollins had enough, and when LeBron soared in Hollins' face for yet another poster dunk, Hollins threw every ounce of his 7-foot, 240-pound frame into LeBron's 265-pound wall of momentum, upending LeBron, drawing a flagrant foul and starting a scuffle under the basket that drew a technical foul on LeBron.

The skirmish was a dose of savory bloodlust for 20,562 packed into The Q, many in the crowd -- it seemed, anyway -- on hand solely for the purpose of rooting against LeBron, who was making his first Cleveland appearance as a member of the Heat after missing both regular season games in Cleveland -- one with elbow tendinitis and one with back spasms. They were the only two games LeBron missed all season.

With Hollins asserting himself and a waterfall of vitriol cascading on LeBron from 360 degrees, the Heat started to buckle. The Cavs, who were down 11 at the time, stormed past, led by 27 from J.J. Hickson and 22 from Mo Williams, to gut-check the Heat 111-92.

The Heat, who had seldom been challenged en route to cruising to the NBA's best record, were offered their first real test of the season. The test of courage, fortitude and stamina that all great NBA teams must pass in order to become champions.

The Heat didn't fully collapse, but they were visibly jolted for the remainder of the series. Their air of invicibility, the inevitability of their coronation as not just champions for a year, but a decade's ruling dynasty, was wiped away with a well-timed squirt of wine and gold Windex.

LeBron probably remembered it well from the regular season success and playoff collapses of his last two years in Cleveland: when you're really, really good and rolling over teams with ease, the regular season can become an endless parade of rose petals at your feet, as people with cameras and microphones are falling over themselves to sing your praises.

But the playoffs are a bitch. And they get more icy, frigid and unconcered with your ego as the rounds progress.

In this case, LeBron didn't have to wait until the conference finals for his slice of humble pie. He didn't even have to wait until the semifinals. Unlike in past years, when powerhouses like Orlando and Boston bested LeBron, this year, with two superstar wingmen, LeBron felt the bile well in his gut against his old, declawed former employer.

But we didn't totally realize it at that point. There was still basketball to be played.

With Mo Williams exhibiting a proficiency for playoff basketball that was beyond anyone's wildest dreams from years past, the Cavs rode his 30 points to a Game 4 win that knotted the series heading back to South Beach. Late in the first half, Dwyane Wade's drama queen of a hamstring tightened up for approximately the 458th time this season, negating his effectiveness for the remainder of the game. As it was, Wade was averaging a paltry 14 points per game in the series and looked like a glazed ham at times, content to camp out on the wing and wait for LeBron to do something with the ball.
But, as vulnerable as Miami looked in the first two games in Cleveland, they were still perfectly capable of defending their home court, where they lost just three times during the regular season.

The Heat looked like they righted the ship in Game 5, throat-stomping the Cavs with a 30-8 run to start the game, and never letting the Cavs creep closer than nine points the rest of the way,

winning 108-89 for a 3-2 series lead.

Surely, this was the backbreaker for the undermanned, undersized, undertalented Cavs. Like a small college coach trying to get his team out of the first round of the NCAA Tournament, Byron Scott was coaching from the book of Norman Dale, Gene Hackman's coach with the checkered past from "Hoosiers." Scott was going just six deep on his roster at times, relying on a season's worth of conditioning, pinpoint shooting and play execution to compensate for the raw size and sheer talent of the opposition.

If Scott brought his team to American Airlines Arena in Miami ahead of Game 1 with a tape measure to prove that the rims are 10 feet off the ground just like in Cleveland, you really couldn't blame him. It was that kind of disparity.

But somehow, the Cavs weathered three losses in Miami with their season still alive.

Game 6 dawned with LeBron making a conscious effort to get Wade and Chris Bosh involved in the offense early. It had been so tempting for LeBron to drive right into the core of the Cavs' weakened defense that he had spent much of the previous five games looking for his own shot. The new strategy seemed to work, as a rejuvenated Wade had 12 first quarter points and Bosh had 10 several minutes into the second quarter. Miami prodded the lead out to seven, then 10, then 12, 15 and 17, and by the half, 19.

Crisis averted, it seemed. Games 3 and 4 were an aberration, and the Heat could relax and start getting mentally prepared for Round 2. But all upset bids have one thing in common: the right people stepping up and seizing the moment at the right time.

Ryan Hollins did it in Game 3. Daniel "Boobie" Gibson would do it in Game 6.

Gibson knows all about Game 6. It was his 31-point outburst in Game 6 of the 2007 Eastern Conference Finals that sent the Cavs to their only NBA Finals appearance to date. Except Gibson was in the middle of the rotation for that series. For this series four years later, he was coming off five games in which he logged a grand total of six garbage time minutes.

But Scott had an inkling. Gibson's shot looked sweet in shootaround that morning, so he decided to put Gibson on the floor in the second half.

It started harmelssely enough. A three from the wing to cut Miami's lead to 16. Miami got the bucket back with a Wade three at the other end. But then Gibson hit another. And another.

And another.

And another.

And a floater in the lane.

And another.

With each bomb, the Cleveland crowd became a deafening typhoon of decibel power. First a jet at takeoff, then the space shuttle. The Heat felt that feeling welling into their collective esophagus again. Miami's lead died a death at the hands of small, gnawing rodents: 14, 11, 13, 10, 12, 10, 8....

Another Gibson three-ball inside of 50 secondsn in the fourth quarter put the Cavs up by three, and they never relinquished the lead. The 105-100 win sent the series back to Miami for a deciding seventh game.

Which brings us back to the here and now. The Heat, with the weight of a foretold legacy on their shoulders. The Cavs, who hadn't fought this hard and long to have it all end on a warm weeknight in Miami. The fans of Cleveland, who still feel their jaw muscles tighten whenever LeBron appears in that No. 6 Heat uniform.

But Game 7 wasn't about any of that. It was about survival. About best-laid plans thrown to the roadside in favor of doing whatever it took to win.
Neither team led by more than six. Neither team did the sport of basketball any aesthetic favors. There were rocks off the glass and rim-chipping bricks. LeBron airballed a three, Ramon Sessions countered with an airball of his own. There were unforced turnovers, botched rebounds and blown defensive assignments as both teams fought their own physical and mental exhaustion in a series that was far longer and more emotionally-charged than anyone on either side anticipated.

In that spirit, both teams missed a chance to win the game with less than 10 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter. In overtime, even the Miami crowd struggled to keep up its intensity, the scoreboard inciting the fans to make noise, and receiving diminishing returns each time.

In Cleveland, you were waiting for LeBron to make a bucket, or Bosh, or Wade, or someone. A kickout to Mike Miller for a three. Someone had to insert the dagger. But the Heat kept forcing up bad shots, and the Cavs did just enough right to arrive inside of 24 seconds with a 112-112 tie and the ball.

Gibson's perplexing three-point attempt sailed off the mark and carmoed off several players before ending up in the hands of Hickson. For the first time since his rookie year, the pump-fake move that had been his crutch for much of his first couple of seasons actually worked. He drew Bosh's sixth foul and managed to chuck the ball high enough that it bounced off the rim and fell

in with 10.7 seconds to play. The subsequent made free-throw put the Cavs up by three.

Miami spent what seemed like half an hour trying to diagram a play for the final seconds, and all it netted was LeBron James, above the key, dribbing the clock down to three seconds before jab-stepping and hoisting a 35-foot three-ball that missed wide left at the buzzer.

The Cavs bench raced toward their teammates on the floor, interlocking in a mass-embrace by the scorer's table, jumping in unison. Impossible achieved. World shocked.

Scott raced toward his team and was eventually mobbed by a hobbled Varejao in street clothes, assaulting his coach in much the same way a St. Bernard assaults his owner after a long day at work.

"I have no words right now," Scott later told reporters. "Thirty years in this game, multiple NBA titles, two Finals as a coach. And I've never been a part of anything like this. It's just incredible."

On the other side, Wade sat on the Miami bench and maintained a glassy-eyed stare at the floor for about 20 minutes after the final buzzer. LeBron stormed off the court for the fourth straight year, offered the Cavs no handshake, and only made a 90-second appearance for the media about an hour after the game ended. But he did keep his jersey on, breaking from his Cleveland tradition of yanking his jersey off immediately following an elimination loss.

"We lost. I got nothing else to break it down for you," he explained in a curt tone during his brief media session. "Maybe we're supposed to learn a lesson that we haven't learned yet. I don't know."

LeBron is starting another long summer, kicked off by his most humiliating playoff loss to date, where he will have to digest and meditate on what just happened. The Cavs? They have no such time. An hour after the game ended, as LeBron was delivering his comments to the rolling cameras, the Cavs were already packed and preparing to leave for the airport.

No time to party on South Beach for Scott's gang. They have a second-round date with the winner of the Atlanta-Chicago series to prepare for.
Tomorrow is another day of practice for the Cavs at Cleveland Clinic Courts.

In the NBA playoffs, normalcy is the reward for winning.