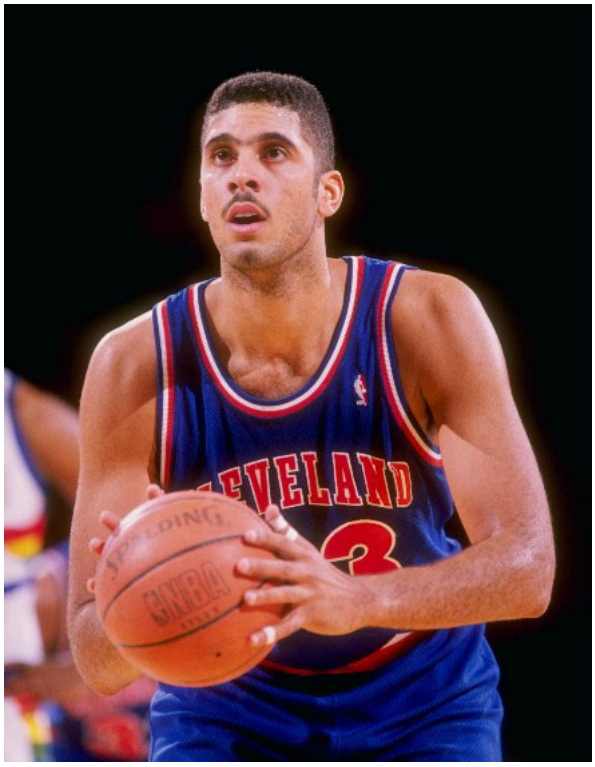

During the past six years, the Cleveland Cavaliers have traded away numerous draft choices and largely missed on the few they've retained. While the departure of the Treasonous-Scuzball-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless is partly to blame for the current team's unbelievably lackluster play, there is plenty to go around.

It begins with former general manager Danny Ferry, who nonetheless must be commended for trying to improve the team via trade during the preceding six years. His approach was highly logical at the time, given the pressure to win at any cost, immediately.

But it's now painfully evident that such an approach is not the way to build a team for the long haul. Not to second-guess Ferry, but those missteps are now coming home to roost.

Since 2004 -- the year after the Treasonous Scuzball was drafted -- the Cavs have retained just seven draft choices from a normal complement of 14. That's right: seven. Of those, just three rather mediocre players remain: Daniel Gibson (2nd round, 42nd overall in 2006), J.J. Hickson (1st round, 19th overall in 2008) and Christian Eyenga (1st round, 30th overall in 2009). Gone are Luke Jackson (1st round, 10th overall in 2004), Shannon Brown (1st round, 25th overall in 2006), Ejike Ugboaja (2nd round, 55th overall in 2006) and Danny Green (2nd round, 46th overall in 2009).

For the Cavaliers to be competitive again, we can only hope for a “perfect storm” of player personnel moves such as those orchestrated by Harry Weltman, Wayne Embry and Gary Fitzsimmons in the middle to late 1980s. The events that transpired during those years were fairly uncommon by anyone’s estimation -- and there was nary a miscalculation of any kind.

A History Lesson

In an attempt to learn how the Cavaliers might today re-assemble a competitive team, we look back to the 1988-89 season, which posted a franchise-best-ever 57-25 record. That, of course, was the season we were eliminated by eventual NBA champion Michael Jordan’s Chicago Bulls in the Eastern Conference Finals.

During that blockbuster season, the Cavs’ roster included John “Hot Rod” Williams, Brad Daugherty, Ron Harper, Mark Price, Mike Sanders, Craig Ehlo and Larry Nance.

Williams was the first to join the team, drafted as the 45th overall choice in the second round in 1985. He fell into the Cavs’ lap because he’d been arrested for suspicion of point shaving while at Tulane University. Indeed, he didn’t play for the Cavs until the 1986-87 season, after he was found not guilty on five counts of sports bribery and conspiracy. That season, he was named to the NBA All-Rookie team.

Daugherty was drafted first overall in 1986, another move that was, at the time, controversial. First of all, the Cavs had to obtain that precious first choice -- accomplished by trading Roy Hinson and cash to the Philadelphia 76ers. Then, on draft day, they passed on University of Maryland All-American Len Bias, who was regarded as the best player in the draft. Bias, drafted right behind Daugherty by Boston, died two days later from cardiac arrhythmia induced by a cocaine overdose. It’s still not evident to this day why the Cavaliers didn’t choose Bias, who had no history of drug abuse -- but they didn’t, and thus the second fortuitous circumstance came to pass.

Joining Daugherty in that unbelievably successful 1986 draft were Harper out of Miami (Ohio) University drafted eighth overall, and Price, drafted 25th overall out of Georgia Tech. Most

observers regarded the Harper choice as a longshot, since he was not a product of a top-flight basketball program. And the Cavs would not have had a shot at Price had they not “stolen” the pick from Dallas for the draft rights to Ray Tarpley. Apparently, the Cavs felt that they really didn’t need a No. 7 in the first round, having secured the top spot. So they virtually flip-flopped with Dallas. (It should be noted that Tarpley’s career was later hampered by drug abuse while the much-loved Price became the Cavs’ version of “Mr. Clean.”)

In 1987, feeling he needed a two-guard to complement Price, Embry signed free agent Craig Ehlo, a move that was considered minor at the time, but which eventually helped round out the roster in a big way.

The final pieces of the roster puzzle were affected the following season when the two starting forwards on that 1988-89 team were added in a blockbuster trade: Nance and Sanders, from Phoenix, for Kevin Johnson, Mark West, Tyrone Corbin and the Cavs’ first- and second-round choices in the 1988 draft.

Interestingly enough, this near-championship roster was assembled when the Cavaliers’ front office was not exactly stable. In the 1984-86 years, Weltman was vice president and general manager; in 1986, Embry took his place; and in 1988, Fitzsimmons was added as director of player personnel. The head coaches were George Karl, Gene Littles and, from 1986 on, the great Hall-of-Famer Lenny Wilkens.

The Lessons

So what can majority owner Dan Gilbert, president Len Komoroski and general manager Chris Grant learn from their predecessors about fielding a contender?

1) It takes more than money, Len.

2) It takes more than want-to, Dan.

3) It takes more than ping-pong balls, Chris.

4) It takes a combination of all three, with a lot of riverboat-gambling-type luck.

5) And, finally, champions are not assembled overnight. Even if everything falls into place, the Cavaliers are at least three years from being a bona fide contender. And “everything falling into place” is an absolutely huge “if.”