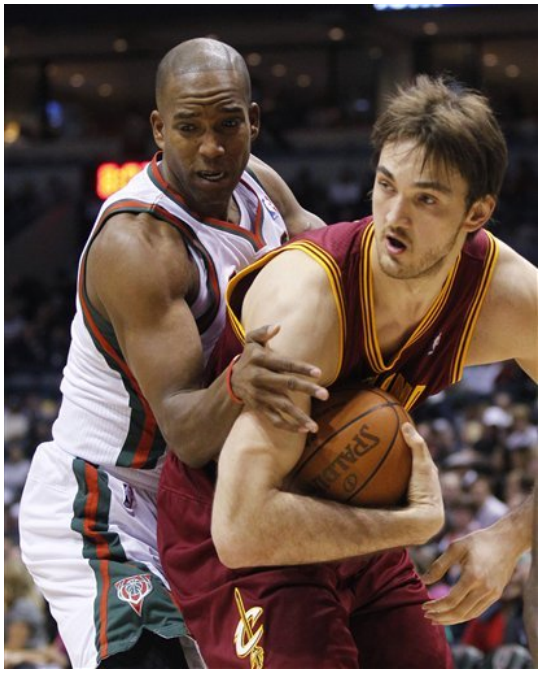

For local fans who are foolishly fixated on the Cavaliers finishing with the worst record in the league so they have the best chance of getting the No. 1 choice in the 2011 college draft, the team put another ping-pong ball in the hopper -- figuratively speaking -- Saturday night. Head coach Byron Scott's troops (and I use the word advisedly) lost an eminently winnable game to the host Milwaukee Bucks, 108-101.

Often overlooked by those begging for the Cavs to keep losing is the fact that the NBA team with the worst record has not drafted first since the Magic took Dwight Howard in 2004. That's seven years ago. Not to mention the fact that many of the best underclassmen might not declare for the draft because of the league's impending labor strife. Not to mention the fact that Duke guard Kyrie Irving has already been anointed the best player in the draft, and the Cavs don't really need another point guard next season if Baron Davis and Ramon Sessions remain ambulatory. (Agree with me or not, if you've seen them play lately, you have to give credit where credit is due.)

Anyway, it's been a great race to the bottom of the standings with the Minnesota Timberwolves, who look as though they packed their swimsuits into their Samsonite luggage two weeks ago. The Wolves, who've lost 13 in a row after being humiliated 130-106 in Denver Saturday night, have an identical 17-63 record. And only two games remain in the regular season.

At least the Cavs are still getting floor burns -- occasionally. They scrapped from as many as 17

points down to come within two points of the Bucks on a Ramon Sessions runner, 89-87, with 7:19 remaining in the fourth quarter.

It seems, however, that Coach Scott will have his work cut out for him over the summer. Somehow, some way, he's got to teach his younger players what defense is. Milwaukee, which is the lowest scoring team in the NBA with the worst field-goal shooting percentage and the fewest assists, made mincemeat of the Cavalier defense, especially in the first half when it scored 60 points. The Timberwolves ended the game shooting 50.6 percent from the field, amassing 31 assists on 41 field goals, and scoring more than 100 points for only the 18th time this season.

Once again, the Cavs made a fairly run-of-the-mill player look like an All-Star. This time it was Buck guard John Salmons, who scored 32 points on 14 of 18 shooting from the field -- most of which were jump shots. (He averages 13.6 points per game.) And old friend Drew Gooden had the first triple-double of his career, finishing with 15 points, 13 rebounds and 13 assists.

What is it that my erstwhile TCF colleagues often exclaim in print? Great Googly-Moogly? Did I spell that right, guys?

The Cavaliers lost the opening tip and never led in the game. They appeared flat and uninspired for the entire first half, especially the first quarter. Power forward J.J. Hickson was whistled for his second foul with 7:53 left in the first stanza and was removed for the remainder of the half, probably taking a lot of starch out of the Cavs' sails.

A good indication of the Cavs' stagnation was the first-half rebounding statistics. They had just 14, compared to 33 for Milwaukee. During the lackadaisical first 24 minutes, the Cavs also scored just two second-chance points and two fast-break points. Those are not the type of stats that will give you a woody.

However, they made some amends in the second half -- especially the third quarter, when they shot 65 percent from the field, sparked by Sessions. Between him and Davis, the Cavs were gifted 34 points and 11 assists from their point guards by the final buzzer. Hickson also had a decent second half after going scoreless the first half. He finished with 11 points and 12 rebounds.

Youngsters Abound

As the season comes to a close, it appears that Coach Scott is making a concerted effort to see more of his youngsters. With Anthony Parker playing less than seven minutes because of recurring back pains, newcomers Semih Erden (22 minutes) and Luke Harangody (19 minutes) and rookie Manny Harris (19 minutes) saw plenty of action. Even rookie Christian Eyenga, who had been banished to Scott's doghouse for defensive lapses, logged almost 13 minutes. None of the four had any statistics to write home about, but none looked especially bad, either.

Erden was still rusty from his recent stay on the injured list, but he showed some decent inside moves and basketball savvy. But Harris, who had some fine games earlier in the season, looked completely lost playing alongside Davis. Harangody, of course, was his usual scrappy self.

Meanwhile, Eyenga has apparently replaced Hickson as the biggest tease on the team. Like Hickson, he has to be careful not to hit his head on the backboard. Like Hickson earlier in the season, he needs to show some want-to on the defensive end of the court. And like Hickson earlier in the season, Eyenga is wildly inconsistent. (In his defense, he is still a rook -- no, make that Rook with a capital R.)

Last but certainly not least is the play of rookie forward Alonzo Gee, who continues to make tremendous strides with each game. In the absence of the injured Samardo Samuels, Gee was again in the starting lineup; he finished with 14 points (on five-of-five shooting from the field) and five total rebounds (three offensive) in 30 minutes of action. Gee, like Hickson, is an extremely active player. All year, he's been able to put the ball on the floor and drive to the basket pretty effectively. But he's also developing a jump shot: two of his five FGs were treys. If he continues to develop -- and he appears to be a very driven, conscientious player who is an excellent student -- he could become a vital cog on the Cavs' roster for years to come.

Next Up...

Anyway, here's the deal for the rest of this thankless Season from Hell: Monday night at Detroit,

and Wednesday versus Washington at the Q. Wednesday's game, which begins at 8 p.m., will not only be Fan Appreciation Night ("$1 million in prizes! Every fan will go home with something!") but also the final time that you will be able to hear WTAM's Joe Tait warble, "Have a good night, everybody!"