Hands down, John Hnat is one of my favorite writers ... and I'm excited to have him back in the fold with this piece. In it, John makes a good point: the Cavs won 50 games last season despite the fact that almost everything that could have gone wrong, did. In his '06-'07 Cavs preview piece, Hnat is optimistic about the season ahead of us. And unlike the misguided optimism some of us (cough ... me) had about the Browns, this is realistic optimism.

The start of the Cavs' season is about a week away as I write these words. It's the time of the year when optimism reigns supreme.

A time when every player on the roster has improved since last spring.

A time when the birds are singing, the sun is shining, and ...

Forget it. I can't even complete that sentence. It's Cleveland in October, the sky is a permanent battleship gray, and the only birds left here are the ones too stupid to know which way is south. (When I see a pair of birds in the sky this time of year, I am convinced that the male bird of the couple is flying aimlessly, refusing to stop and ask for directions, all while insisting that he's just taking the shortcut to Florida.)

Enough digressing. The point is: it's time to look forward to Cavs season.

That point was driven home a couple of days ago. A poster on one of the message boards that I frequent started the obligatory thread asking for predictions on how the team will do this year. The responses were almost unanimously positive -- win totals well in excess of last season's 50, and the main question being would the team make it to the Finals, or bow out at "only" the conference finals.

As a lifelong Cavs fan (thank you for your condolences), I know all too well that these

pre-season predictions are usually an exercise in homerism more than anything else. Most everybody is too optimistic; most everybody is too aware of the reasons why the team could get better, and all too ignorant of the potential for the season turning sour.

So I was all ready to fire off a smart-ass reply of "40-42, just missing the final playoff spot" prediction. Not because I actually believed it, but just to be contrary.

Then I realized: the only reason for such a prediction would be a desire to be a contrarian.

The key point I want to make is this: the Cavs won 50 games last season despite the fact that *almost everything that could have gone wrong, did.*

It's easy to lose sight of this point because last year was the Cavs' best year in quite some time. But outside of Witness: Year Three, the Cavs had almost everything go wrong that could have. Think about it for a minute:

* Their high-profile FA acquisition (Hughes) missed 50-some games with an injury, wasn't effective when he finally did return, and then missed a chunk of the playoffs for good measure;

* That injury caused a lot of second and third-tier players -- Pavlovic, Flip Murray, Newble, Jackson -- to play much more often than they should have (they totaled 2,508 minutes during the regular season);

* Their other two major FA acquisitions (Damon Jones, Marshall) both showed up out of shape (by their own admission; in Jones' case, he said he didn't work out much during the summer b/c he didn't want to jeopardize his FA payday with a worjout-induced injury) and never really got in the flow the entire season;

* A key reserve (Varejao) missed approximately half the season with a serious injury of his own;

* Eric Snow found his way to all 82 games -- never once did he miss the team bus or get lost driving to the arena;

* The team's most recent high draft pick (Jackson) was injured most of the time and ineffective when he wasn't;

* The team had no draft picks in the prior draft to provide some young blood (I am not counting Marty Alphabet);

* The front office was in upheaval, with a new GM and a new coach;

* Said new coach (a first-time NBA head coach) was intent on installing his own schemes, particularly on the defensive end.

Add it all up, and it's kind of a surprise that they won 50 games and made it to the second round.

Let's compare to this year:

* Hughes is back to being healthy, or at least healthy enough to contribute. His finger may not be 100% healed, but it should be well enough;

* Marshall and Jones look like they spent the entire off-season in the gym. Marshall in particular looks like a man on a mission;

* The rest of the team is healthy. No injuries, nobody starting the season on the disabled list;

* The front office brought in two battle-tested veterans in Pollard and Wesley. I especially love the Pollard signing -- he does the dirty work and is about as tough a guy as you can be while wearing multiple ponytails and painted fingernails. I'm less sold on Wesley, who I fear will end up being Lucious Harris II: The Sequel, but he has been a double-digit point scorer for many years;

* The draft looks to have been about as successful as it can be when you're picking in the mid 20s. Getting Shannon Brown was a coup, and Gibson has more potential than I would normally expect for a second rounder. If Wesley falters, I think Shannon will be there to pick up the slack;

* Perhaps most importantly, the front office and coaching staff has continuity. Bubba Gump Brown has said that he's much more comfortable with where the team is defensively, and hopefully that means more emphasis on offensive movement.

I really cannot emphasize this last point enough. During the exhibition against Maccabi last week, the Cavs were actually running screens.

Screens, I tell you!

If you watched much of last season at all, that observation should reverberate.

Too often last season, the Cavs' offense consisted of "pass to LeBron and watch him for 24 seconds".

No movement, a lot of standing around, nothing to confuse the defense.

It's still very early, and preseason games are an unreliable barometer, but it does seem that Coach Brown recognized the need for a better offensive flow, and has been working to change it.

I'm not asking for Tex Winter and the Triangle here.

With the Cavs' personnel, just a few basic movement plays should open up a lot of opportunities.

It looks like that's what we're going to have.

Will everything that appears positive actually pan out that way? Probably not.

Will bad things happen along the way? Most assuredly so. (And if LeBron's knee explodes, then we're back to thinking about ping-pong balls in May.)

But 57 wins and a spot in the Eastern Conference finals seems rather ... realistic. So mark me down for that.