It's been since the Indians teams of the mid to late nineties that any Cleveland team has started a season amid as much hype as this years Cavaliers team. The Cavs are a sexy pick amongst national media types to represent the Eastern Conference in the NBA Finals, and have the best player in all of basketball. With the start of their season just two days away, I make my argument that this will be a much improved Cavaliers team despite no major personnel changes this off-season.

For the first time in almost six years, there's title talk in Cleveland.

The Browns haven't been contenders since the late eighties. The Indians have been in a perpetual rebuild since Jamie Moyer and the Seattle Mariners finished us off in game five of the ALDS in 2001. And the Cavs haven't been this legitimate since the days of Price, Nance, Daugherty, and Hot Rod in the early nineties.

Let's face it, Cleveland is unlike most other sports towns. We haven't won a championship since 1964. Only the 1995 and 1997 Indians have even reached the Finals of their respective sport during the last 43 years of championship abstinence. The Browns have never reached a Super Bowl. The Cavs have never sniffed the NBA Finals.

Even the specter of title talk is exciting in this city. It's a very exhilirating feeling ... going into a season knowing your team has as good a chance as any to be playing for the title.

The Cavaliers made no headline grabbing trades or free agent signings this off-season, but are likely the safest bet in the East for 50 wins, and have the most potential upside of any of the contenders in our conference. The biggest factor in that equation is the continued development of LeBron James, who became the best player in the NBA last season ... despite the fact he was robbed of the Most Valuable Player Award.

The fact that James averaged 31.4, 7.7, and 6.6 last season cause people to discount the notion that James still stands to significantly improve as a player this season, and the effect that could subsequently have on the win total for the 2006-2007 Cavaliers. LeBron is just 21 years of age, and as scary as it seems, he will continue to improve this season. I fully expect James to finally become a force at the defensive end this season, to become a better low post player, and to shoot three pointers at a higher percentage. And that alone should lead to another 3-4

wins over last years total of 50, even if you completely discount some of the other factors I have listed below.

In addition to the LeBron factor, many fans seem to forget that Larry Hughes missed 50 games last season, and the team never had he and Anderson Varejao healthy at the same time. Even 65 games out of Hughes this season, at a slightly higher performance level that last years tallies, will have much more of an effect on this team than most fans realize. Consider this - the Cavaliers were forced to rely on the following quartet of players for more than twenty minutes per night last season: Luke Jackson, Stephen Graham, Ira Newble, and Sasha Pavlovic. This year, those minutes will go to guys like Hughes, David Wesley, and Shannon Brown.

Some other things to consider when thinking about this years Cavs versus last years Cavs:

A new offensive approach - The team is restructuring their offense in traning camp to become less reliant on having a true point guard on the floor. The Cavs plan to continue to feature the pick and roll, but also plan to let LeBron and Larry initiate the offense more. I heard a great radio interview with coach Brown a couple weeks ago in which he was very open and honest about some things he struggled with as a rookie NBA coach. First and foremost was the fact that the offense that he brought to CTown with him was heavily dependant on a true point guard setting things up, and two strong wing players being able to initiate things with dribble penetration. And that when Hughes went down, he wasn't comfortable changing everything ... despite the fact that his personnel no longer really matched the offense.

Donyell and Damon can't be any worse - It's nearly impossible for Donyell Marshall and Damon Jones to shoot the ball any worse than they did last season. Both players saw their field goal and three point percentages plummet from the year prior, and this was despite the fact they were even more consistently wide open in their attempts last season. Only six teams shot three pointers at a lower connection rate than the Cavs last year. With the addition of Wesley, and Donyell and Damon likely to connect at a higher rate (even if the improvement is small), the Cavaliers should be a better three point shooting team this year.

The addition of Scot Pollard - Upgrading Alan Henderson with the free agent signing of Scot Pollard is a bigger deal than most fans think. Henderson's career is about over. Pollard is still an active and intimidating big man that can check the best bigs in the league, and help cut down on the numerous unchallenged drives to the bucket by Cavaliers opponents. Z, Gooden, and Marshall are all finesse big men, and teams had no fear bringing the ball inside against this team. With an emerging presence like Anderson Varejao, and an enforcer like Pollard finally brought in ... the Cavs finally have some attitude down low. Lastly, the addition of Pollard and resigning of Gooden gives the Cavs a stable of five legitimate big men that makes just about any other GM in the league envious. This will ease the minute per game burden on this quintet and also lessen the impact of a potential injury to one of them. Pollard is not likely to start the season in Coach Brown's rotation, but will quickly find his way into games.

Mike Brown is no longer a rookie coach - This is something alot of fans are overlooking in my view, and Mary Schmitt Boyer has an excellent column about this exact point in this morning's Plain Dealer

. As mentioned above, Brown is more comfortable in his offensive schemes and teachings. He's more comfortable with the strengths and weaknesses of his personnel, especially given the minor turnover in the teams roster from last year to this year. And he has a full year of experience, and thirteen playoff games under his belt. We saw progression in Mike Brown as a coach throughout the season, even from game to game in the playoffs. I would expect to see that progression continue throughout this season.

With the start of the Cavs season now just two days away, suffice it to say that I am very excited about the teams prospects this season. I see the fifty wins from a year ago as a floor for this team, and feel that an Eastern Conference title is a very realistic proposition.