

# Overconfidence cost Pistons a chance at East

By Larry Lage

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DETROIT — What made the Detroit Pistons a championship team also led to their downfall this season.

**Confidence.**  
The Pistons believed they could overcome any obstacle because history showed them they usually did.

Detroit overcame a 3-2 deficit four times the past four postseasons, including last month against Cleveland, but couldn't do it a fifth time against the Heat.

"We got a little too comfortable with all of the comebacks we had in the past," point guard Chauncey Billups acknowledged Friday night in Miami after being eliminated in Game 6 of the Eastern Conference finals. "It blew up in our face."

Like the Red Wings, the Pistons didn't consistently play with a sense of urgency against a hungry opponent in the playoffs perhaps because both teams are led by veterans with championship rings and millions in the bank.

Ben Wallace said the Heat "most definitely" wanted to win the series more than Detroit did.

"I thought we came out and got a little too passive," he said. "They did what we used to do to teams, forcing them to play the way you want to play."

The Pistons climbed from being a poor team to a good one to the 2004 champions because they played together

as a true team, and listened to their hard-driving coaches. Larry Brown and Flip Saunders.

They kept it up during the regular season under Flip Saunders, their third coach in four years, because they were motivated to earn home-court advantage after falling just short of repeating as champions in Game 7 at San Antonio almost 12 months ago.

Detroit's drive led to a franchise-record and league-best 64 victories, leading to being favored to win a championship for the fourth time in franchise history.

The Pistons maintained the momentum generated by their spectacular season early in the playoffs, scoring easily and making it tough for Milwaukee and Cleveland to do much productive during their first seven games of the playoffs.

But around the time Rasheed Wallace injured his ankle in Game 4 against the Cavs, the Pistons started to fall apart. They relied on one-on-one moves offensively, instead of moving the ball around to teammates with set plays, and gave up easy lay-ups and open shots.

"Getting off to such a great start, it probably kind of hurt us," Billups said. "Things came so easy for us that we felt like sometimes we could walk out there and teams would lay down."

Saunders might've tried to tell his players not to get caught in that trap, but he

might not have been heard if it was during one of his odd timeouts.

Throughout the season when there was a time-out, Saunders would talk things over with his staff, then talk to the players briefly on the bench before breaking the huddle with plenty of time to spare.

Power forward Rasheed Wallace would often use the extra minute or so to lounge on the scorer's table, perhaps playfully knocking over a water bottle in front of former Bad Boy and radio analyst Rick Mahorn, while some teammates were still on the bench.

"I think that's overblown when people talk about the timeouts," Billups said.

Maybe, maybe not. While Pat Riley used almost every second of every time-out to make adjustments, the Pistons appeared to act like they knew it all. That's why reserve Antonio McDyess said the players ultimately are to blame for falling short of the finals for the first time in three years.

"It's not Flip's fault, it's the way that we came out and played," McDyess said. "We didn't play the basketball we normally play. We didn't move the ball, we didn't stop anybody. Flip can only put so much in front of you."

"We let them totally take our heart, especially to let them win by that margin (17 points) in a game that decided things."



PHOTO/CALVIN FERGUSON

Johnson C. Smith President Dorothy Cowser Yancy took delivery of a check for \$1 million earmarked for CIAA schools from Erika Crawford to the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority from the conference basketball tournament in Charlotte earlier this year.

## CIAA fights to keep status quo

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"The NCAA will not budge off that," Cessna replied. "They said it was too big of a change."

Oh, but revamping the entire Division II just to appease white teams sick of getting beat in basketball by a black conference isn't?

Another issue at hand is the teams in the proposed Atlantic Region — Pennsylvania State and West Virginia athletic conferences — were in no hurry to schedule CIAA schools before the proposed change.

Cessna said the committee is in discussions with conference commissioners to make it a mandate to play teams in their region.

And then there's the travel costs. During basketball season, conference games are normally played on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday nights.

"Who's going to drive to Pennsylvania or West Virginia on a Tuesday night to play a game," Curtis said. "They are not coming down here, and we ain't going up there."

At which point, Shaw Athletics Director Al Carter interjected: "No, we're not going up there."

The matter will be settled June 12 when Cessna takes her "notes" to the NCAA championship committee.

However, North Carolina Central women's coach Joli Robinson says why wait. The time to act is now.

"If it weren't for basketball, we wouldn't be here right now," she said. "I say let's hire a civil rights lawyer and stop this. Every year it's the same thing, I'm getting sick of it."

## Bozeman grateful for second chance with Morgan State

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The addition of Todd Bozeman will hopefully be viewed years from now as the turning point in the history of Morgan State's basketball program," Athletics Director Floyd Kerr said.

The Bears' record was 4-26 last year. Bozeman coached at the University of California until 1996, when he was accused of making payments to the parents of Cal player Jelani Gardner. He was also cited for denying the NCAA violations and providing false and misleading information during the initial investigation.

During the eight-year ban, any school that wanted to hire Bozeman had to appeal to the NCAA infraction committee and "show cause or reason" why he should be hired.

Bozeman, 42, was released from the show-cause on June 1, 2005.

"It's the right time, the right place, and the right situation for me," Bozeman said. "My goal is to make the Morgan State basketball program a special place to students, fans, alumni and everybody who supports the program."

Joe McLean, a leader on the men's basketball team, said: "I'm very excited about next season, because I'll be a senior, and I feel coach Bozeman will be different, but it will be fun." Bozeman brings 15 years of coaching experience and three NCAA tournament berths. At age 29, he was the youngest head coach ever in the NCAA Sweet 16. Bozeman posted a 63-35 career record at Cal.

A native of Washington, D.C., Bozeman has contacts in the Baltimore area and said he had a strong desire to recruit students locally.

Austin Ward and Jessica Harris are students at Morgan State who write for the Spokesman.

## Jewels headed to national AAU

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The Jewels, who are in their second year, are 52-4 during that span.

Corporate and individual donations are needed and welcomed since many of the athletes can't afford the required fees to participate. Individuals or companies interested in donating can call Garrie Burks at (704) 299-

5068 for additional information. To offset tournament costs, the team will be fundraising and the parents hosted a "Grown Folks Party" at the Gold Pepper Grill and Lounge, 101 N Tryon St. last week.

For additional fundraising events, check the Jewels' website at [www.eteamz.com/queencityjewelsgreen](http://www.eteamz.com/queencityjewelsgreen)

## For first time in 26 years, Mavericks in NBA Finals

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and better and we got to be a playoff team. It's been a fun ride. Hopefully we can take it to the next level and bring this franchise a ring."

In the postgame exuberance, there were chants of "M-V-P" for Nowitzki, tears in the eyes of Cuban and lumps in the throat of former stars like Derek Harper and Rolando Blackman, plus assistant GM Keith Grant, one of the club's first employees.

Most of all, though, there was praise for their unquestioned leader, coach Avery Johnson, who kept his team focused on winning a championship since the day he replaced Don Nelson in March 2005.

"This opportunity comes from a guy by the name of coach Avery Johnson being able to implement that thought in the guys' heads, that they can get this done," said Blackman, now an assistant coach. "All he's talked about is having the opportunity to win a championship. How many guys are on board? Who really wants to be able to get it done? He's made them live up to that standard throughout the whole year."

As Cuban received the trophy for winning the Western Conference, Johnson stood a few feet away, an arm on a hip and looking down. Cuban's voice cracked as he discussed his appreciation for Johnson pushing the club this far. Seeing how solemn Johnson looked during it all, reserve guard Marquis Daniels hollered, "Smile, AJ!"

He did, but not for long. After all, he only has until Thursday to figure out how to slow Shaquille O'Neal, Dwyane Wade and the Miami Heat.

"We signed up to win the championship," he said. "We're delighted to be there. But we're not satisfied."

As a reward for winning 60 games in the regular season, the Mavericks own home-court advantage, meaning the first two games — Games 6 and 7, if necessary — will be in Dallas.

With Miami also a first-time finalist, this will be the first time since 1971, when the Milwaukee Bucks beat the Baltimore Bullets, that both teams are making their championship-round debut.

The Mavericks also got themselves off the list of teams that have never made the finals. Only the Cleveland Cavaliers, Los Angeles Clippers and Denver Nuggets have been in the league

longer without making it.

Amid the celebration, Cuban thanked Nelson for being the patriarch of the team's turnaround.

"Nellie" lifted the franchise from the dregs starting in the late 1990s, turning over the entire roster save for Michael Finley, later surrounding him with Steve Nash and Nowitzki. He also brought in Johnson as a player, first making him part of the staff when he was left off the 2003 playoff roster.

"When we first got here it was rough," Nowitzki said. "We were in that old arena. It stunk. It was bad. So we fought through a lot of stuff. ... It's been fun the whole ride so far."

Nowitzki also brought up Nash — who now plays for the Suns — and Finley.

"We kind of built that triangle for a while, which was great," Nowitzki said. "They're great friends and it hurt losing them. I wish, obviously both would still be here to enjoy this moment with me."

Nash has been voted MVP both seasons since he left Dallas. But he hasn't made the finals.

"To see Dirk be able to play for the championship, it's exciting," Nash said. "I mean, it hurts a lot that I won't be able to do it, but I really admire what he's been able to do. I'm proud of his accomplishments and what he's meant to that team."

Johnson was only a few months removed from his playing career when he replaced Nelson. He forced players to take defense seriously, demanded that they be tougher mentally and physically and constantly talked about winning it all, something he learned as the starting point guard on San Antonio's 1999 title team.

Dallas came into this season widely viewed as a middle-of-the-pack playoff team, but Johnson molded the supporting cast around a still-blossoming Nowitzki and the result is something the previous 25 Mavericks teams couldn't accomplish.

"There were times when you went to games in the 1990s and people wore bags over their heads," said Harper, now a team broadcaster. "They have to lift those bags and be proud of what this franchise has been able to accomplish."

Said Grant, who has gone from equipment manager to assistant GM: "It's been quite a ride."

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