



As if Kyrie Irving weren't already Cleveland's best hope for a new folk hero, the 20 year-old phenom added a bit of costume flair to his repertoire last night, sporting a badass Zorro mask while dropping a career-high 41 points on the New York Knicks at the Garden. Kyrie's Cavaliers still fell a free throw short in the end, 103-102, but as long as the masked man wears the wine and gold, the people of this land will still have something to believe in.

Some say he wears the mask to shield his identity from his foes. Others say he wears it as a show of solidarity with his people—a faceless servant of the greater good. Still others claim he fractured his jaw slamming his face into the floor the previous night against the Milwaukee Bucks, and was merely wearing the mask as protection against injury. Whatever. Cleveland already has two other masked men in Tyler Zeller (fractured cheekbone) and Tristan Thompson (nasal fracture), but their transparent plastic visors are silly and cartoonish in comparison to Irving's medieval assassin look.

It didn't hurt that Kyrie was an assassin on the court, as well, connecting on 15-of-25 shots and 5-of-8 threes in an absolutely electrifying performance. Behind his efforts, the Cavs (5-20) once again battled an elite team right down to the bitter end—a noble pattern that unfortunately hasn't resulted in a lot of W's. This one was a particularly tough pill to swallow, as Irving's 17-point fourth quarter set up a chance to tie the game in the final second of regulation. With the clock winding down and Cleveland trailing 103-101, Kyrie found an open Anderson Varejao in the paint. Andy (9 pts, 8 rbs) was swiftly mugged, setting up a pressure-packed pair of free throws with 1/10 of a second on the game clock. As you may have surmised, Varejao—a much-improved foul shooter—splashed the first attempt, bringing the Cavs one bucket from overtime. But the second toss rattled in and out, sending the Knicks (18-5) to their fourth

straight win and a league-best 10-0 home record.

New York was without Carmelo Anthony—sidelined after taking a smackdown from Dwight Howard the night before. But they got plenty of offensive aid from Raymond Felton (25 pts, 7 assts, 5 rbs), Tyson Chandler (23 pts, 10 rbs), and bench players Steve Novak (13 pts and 4 three-pointers) and J.R. Smith (16 pts). Jason Kidd had a brutal night shooting (3-for-14, 9 pts), but it wouldn't necessarily be fair to say that his defense was lacking against Irving. In the fourth quarter especially, Kyrie was launching threes with Kidd's paw jammed in his mask. It didn't matter.



To be fair, though, even Zorro needs allies, and the Cavs were within 3 points at halftime, 48-45, largely thanks to the outside shooting of C.J. Miles, whose recent accuracy from downtown is looking a bit more like a trend than a fluke. Miles had 12 points in the first half and wound up with 17 (including three more triples) and a surprising 8 rebounds.

As for the other members of the Masked Gang, Tristan Thompson added 10 points on 5-of-5 shooting (in just 17 minutes) and Tyler Zeller was solid off the bench: 4-of-5 shooting, 8 points, 6 boards.

With Dion Waiters still out, though, it was solely up to Irving to turn things around in the fourth quarter, after a Jason Kidd three put the Knicks up by double digits for the first time, 85-75, with a little over 8 minutes to go. From that moment forward, Irving factored in every Cleveland point scored (27 in all), either by dishing out the assist-- or in most cases-- handling things himself.

In the final minute, with the Knicks draining their free throws and holding the surging Cavs at bay, Zorro made his last stand, connecting on back-to-back three-pointers, then a pair of free throws, to pull Cleveland within one at 102-101. After Steve Novak split a pair from the line on the other end with 9 seconds to play, Kyrie elected to pass to an open Varejao rather than force a possible game winning three. Perhaps on this night, our masked hero was a bit *too* selfless.