



Damian Lillard may very well wind up the NBA's Rookie of the Year this season, but he ain't got nothin' on his predecessor. In the first meeting between Lillard and 2012 ROY Kyrie Irving, the masked man ran roughshod over the frosh, as the Cavs held on for a 93-88 win over the Blazers at the Rose Garden.

This rarest of NBA rarities—a Cavalier road triumph—ended a four-game losing streak for the Wine and Gold and earned them a measure of revenge for perhaps their most heartbreaking loss of the season. Back on December 1, Portland's Nicolas Batum hit a buzzer-beating three in double-OT to lift the Blazers over the Cavs at the Q. Lillard was electric that night, too, with 24 points, but he didn't have Irving to contend with, as Cleveland's most marketable athlete was out with a broken finger. This time around, Kyrie was primed to make a serious statement. For all the attention Lillard has received, Irving is still the flagship of the new point guard generation, as tonight's 31 point, 5 assist, 4 steal performance displayed quite convincingly.

Irving didn't waste any time proving his point, either, draining 6-of-9 shots for 15 points in the first quarter alone, as Cleveland (10-31) jumped out to a 26-21 edge. That lead grew to as much as 19 in the second quarter, as Irving found Tristan Thompson for an emphatic dunk to make it 51-32 with 2:51 left in the half. Portland's miserable first half shooting (34%) indicated the possibility of tired legs from an OT scrum in the thin air of Denver the previous night. Lillard, in particular, looked a bit lethargic, shooting just 0-for-3 in the first half, as the Cavs took a 53-36 advantage into the break.

This being a Cleveland Cavaliers game, however, things would unavoidably tighten up eventually, and that they did. The Trailblazers (20-19) burst out quickly in the second half, as a pair of LaMarcus Aldridge jumpers and a Wesley Matthews three-pointer were topped off by a monstrous J.J. Hickson dunk—delivering the full posterization treatment on poor Alonzo Gee. By the way, our old pal J.J. (13 pts and 11 rbs on the night) has thoroughly revived his career this season, in case you missed it. The dude's averaging 12 points and 11 rebounds per contest, while the man Cleveland acquired for him—Sir Omri Casspi—is floundering at 4.7 PPG (with a 38% shooting percentage) and demanding a trade. Oh well. The Hickson Haters will no doubt stand their ground, regardless.

In any case, Hickson's dunk cut the Cleveland lead to 9 points at 55-46, and the Blazers continued chipping away from there. In the fourth quarter, with Luke Walton, Shaun Livingston, and an ice cold Dion Waiters on the floor (1-of-9 shooting for 5 points just two nights after dropping 33 on the Kings), the Cavs let their apparent stranglehold on the game slip away entirely, as Damian Lillard finally came to life. The rookie scored 10 of his 13 points in the fourth, including a three that tied the game at 75 with 6:07 to play. From there, the plot could have gone in an all too familiar direction, but as the great players can, Kyrie Irving simply willed the outcome in his favor.

Kyrie answered Lillard's three with a quick jumper on the other end. And when Lillard gave Portland its first lead at 86-85 a few minutes later, Irving answered immediately again, connecting on a ridiculous twirling lay-up and a fade-away jumper off glass to put the Cavs up three, 89-86. A pair of missed free throws from Hickson with 14 seconds left, followed by two makes by Tyler Zeller (11 pts, 9 rbs) sealed the deal.

Portland actually wound up outshooting Cleveland on the night, 39.2% to 38.6%., so it's hard to say this was a terrific team effort. Considering that Dion Waiters was suffering through one of his ugly off-nights, however, kudos are owed to a couple of Kyrie's running mates, namely fellow 2011 draftee Tristan Thompson (19 pts, 14 rbs), whose 10pts/9rbs season averages are *almost* as good as J.J. Hickson's. Props also to Zeller, who played 40 minutes in this contest, bashing elbows with Hickson and LaMarcus Aldridge (15 pts, 10 rbs).

Batum led the way for Portland, scoring 23 with 12 boards to boot. As for Damian Lillard (13 pts, 7 assts), the Weber State grad showed what he's made of with those clutch buckets in the fourth quarter, but in the end, it was Kyrie's night.

My final and favorite stat of the night is a comparison of these two clubs' equally pathetic benches.

Cleveland Bench Players (Walton, Casspi, Waiters, Livingston):

4-for-21 (19%), 15 points, 11 rebounds

Portland Bench Players (Joel Freeland, Jared Jeffries, Nolan Smith, Will Barton, Sasha Pavlovic!):

2-for-18 (11%), 7 points, 14 rebounds

NBA Action! It's fantastic!