

## No Letdown: Cavs Cruise Past Cats

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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For a young team like the Cavaliers it's easy to get up for a game like last Saturday's triumph over the Thunder- a



weekend night, a sellout crowd and a championship contender on the bill. The tough part is following up that emotional effort in a game like Wednesday night's at the Q. The hapless Charlotte Bobcats were in town, and it wouldn't have been surprising to see Cleveland slip back into the flat, sluggish state that characterized last week's losses to Golden State and Detroit.

Instead the Cavaliers did what young teams do all too seldom- followed up a great effort with a better one. They thoroughly dominated Charlotte, 122-95, posting the franchise's largest margin of victory since May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010- back when You-Know-Who was still wearing a Wine & Gold uniform. The Bobcats are now 4-31 since getting off to a 7-5 start way back in November. Cleveland, meanwhile, has now won six of its last nine. Offense, defense, starters, the bench- everybody kicked ass for the Cavaliers, who are definitely trending upward as the season winds into its second half.

Kyrie Irving, who was so spectacular in eviscerating Russell Westbrook and the Thunder last

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Saturday and who beat the Bobcats with a last-second jumper back on January 4th, didn't need to go off to win this one. Although his overall numbers were sparkling- 22 points on 8-of-12 from the field and 5-of-5 from downtown to go with 4 rebounds and 3 assists- the super sophomore was just one of many outstanding performers for the Cavaliers.

The star of the night was the other first-rounder in the Class of 2011. Tristan Thompson roasted the Bobcats for 19 and 11 on 8-of-10 shooting last month in Charlotte and he was at it again on Wednesday night, lighting up the visitors with 17 points on 7-of-8 shooting (3-of-4 from the line) with 9 rebounds, 3 assists and 3 blocks. He took over in the second quarter, dumping in 13 points as Cleveland blew it wide open with a 27-6 run to take a 28-point lead just before halftime. Tristan was a terror on defense too, altering shots and helping make life miserable for the slashing Kemba Walker, who finished with 5 points on 2-of-11 shooting.

As someone who had all but given up hope on Tristan becoming a really serviceable NBA player, I'm stunned and delighted by the way he's stepped up his game this season. The kid has actually developed a go-to offensive move- the running hook, which he can execute with both hands- and he's playing with control and confidence, a far cry from the frantic cluelessness that marked most of his rookie year. He's even hitting his free throws with reasonable regularity, shooting 64 percent from the stripe thus far- not bad at all for a guy who wasn't even at 50 percent as a collegiate.

I don't know if Tristan is ever going to be an All-Star caliber player, but more and more he's looking like a guy you can live with as a regular. Judging by his visible on-court improvement he's a hard-working, dedicated player, and he should only continue to improve. With so many of the other top-ten draftees from 2011 struggling, maybe Chris Grant got this pick a bit more right than some of us were willing to give him credit for.

Dion Waiters also had a big night. The rookie from Syracuse shot over 50 percent in a game for the first time since January 14<sup>th</sup>, hitting 9-of-14 on the way to a 19-point, 5-assist performance. When Dion attacks the basket early it's usually a solid portent, and he did so on Wednesday night. He's a good free-throw shooter (77 percent) and a lousy three-point shooter (32 percent); it stands to reason he's far more effective when he's in the paint than when he's chucking up that sidwinding jumper from 23 feet out.

The bench also got involved, led by the two new imports from Memphis. Marreese Speights followed up his brilliant outing against OKC with an 11-point, 10-rebound double-double in just

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19 minutes of work. Wayne Ellington poured in 16 on 7-of-12 shooting and added 5 rebounds and 3 assists in 22 minutes. Overall the reserves contributed 35 points, 20 rebounds and 17 assists, with Shaun Livingston and Luke Walton dishing out 11 dimes between them.

Offensively Cleveland was a finely tuned machine, shooting 56.7 percent and compiling an impressive 33-to-6 assist-to-turnover ratio. (To be sure, Charlotte is probably the worst defensive team in the NBA.) Defensively, although they allowed 47.4 percent shooting and fell asleep at times as is their wont, the Cavaliers forced 13 turnovers and controlled the backboards, 52-42. To beat Charlotte in itself is unremarkable. To do so in such resounding fashion, after one of the most emotional games of the season, represents a nice sign of growth for this youthful squad.

**Next:** Friday night when the Orlando Magic come to town for a 7:30 tip. Six days before Christmas the Magicians were 12-13 and looked pretty good for a team that had just watched Dewey Howard walk out the door. Since then they're 2-22 and will drag an 11-game losing streak into the Q. Paraphrasing Jim Mora: In my opinion, they suck.

I have to admit, I take some perverse pleasure in watching Orlando crumble. I'm still bitter about the 2009 ECF. I'm not a Dewey Howard fan- he tries way too hard to be funny and he isn't, and people who try way too hard to be funny and aren't work my nerves- and the Magic didn't have any class in victory. I know that Cavaliers team didn't have any class either, what with the fake photo shoots and LeBron walking off the court after Game 6 and all, but that doesn't mean I had to like watching them get shown up. My fondest wish for Friday is for Tristan Thompson to get 20 rebounds and 10 blocks and tell a bunch of lame jokes afterward, just to remind Magic fans of what they've lost.