



For all the attention Dwight Howard is getting for poisoning the reeling L.A. Lakers, the wreckage of his previous handiwork is a far uglier sight to behold, as the Orlando Magic have now dropped 12 straight and 22-of-25 after a 119-108 setback to your Cleveland Cavaliers last night. The Cavs, meanwhile, improved to 6-2 since the back-page trade that brought Marreese Speights and Wayne Ellington to town. Apparently, a serviceable bench really does go a long way.

Back on December 19, the Magic and Lakers had basically the same record (12-13 and 12-14, respectively), and Orlando fans were feeling somewhat optimistic and pleased to be free of their 7-foot locker room cancer. Two months later, the Lakers are still bad, but the Magic (14-36) now look like frontrunners for the top lottery position. As for the Cavs (16-34), the tide seems to be moving in the other direction—which may or may not be a good thing depending on your philosophy on these things. Cleveland, led once again by its soon to be All-Star and 3-Point Shootout representative Kyrie Irving (24 pts, 8 rbs, 6 assts), has won three straight, pulling them within 2 games or less of six lottery teams bunched ahead of them (Toronto and Detroit in the Eastern Conference and Phoenix, Sacramento, New Orleans, and Minnesota in the West).

Returning to the theme of bench quality, it was the clear difference in this ballgame. The Magic got strong performances out of all its starters. Howard's replacement, Nikola Vucevic, was particularly effective, scoring 11 first-quarter points on his way to a career-high 25 (along with 13 boards to boot). Forward Andrew Nicholson connected on 9-of-13 shots on the night for 21 points, Arron Afflalo added 23, and Jameer Nelson posted an impressive double-double with 15 points and 13 assists. Not surprisingly, these combined efforts had Orlando in the game most of the way, with the score tied at 56 at the half. Things slipped away in the third quarter, though,

when the Magic bench was forced to hold its own against Cleveland's suddenly solid second unit.

Trailing 80-77 with 2:24 to go in the third, the Cavs ran out on a 13-0 run in the next four minutes, with most of the heavy lifting done by three guys who weren't on the team at the start of the year—Speights, Ellington, and Shaun Livingston. From there, Irving performed his usual fourth quarter heroics, scoring 7 points in the last 3:27 to stretch the Cavs lead out to a comfortable double digits. But if we're giving out game balls, this one has to go to Marreese Speights, the ex-Grizzly who's looking more and more like a viable contributor for next season.

Now, it's probably worth mentioning that Marreese shot a miserable 3-13 from the field in this contest. So how does a 23% shooting percentage earn you MVP credits? Well, mainly because Speights countered his struggles from the floor by getting himself to the charity stripe. In just 22 minutes, Speights got to the line 6 times, making all 12 of his free throws, including a whole string of them down the stretch. He wound up with 18 points and 5 boards on the night, leading a bench that outscored Orlando's by a 51-15 count! Speights' old Memphis teammate Wayne Ellington added 14, while C.J. Miles and Livingston contributed 8 points a piece.

As for the Cleveland starters, Tristan Thompson (7-11, 16 pts, 5 rbs) and Dion Waiters (6-10, 15 pts) were both selective with their shots and complemented their equally baby-faced superstar admirably.

Kyrie continues to play at a scary level, leading most Cavalier fans to anticipate all sorts of potential horrors awaiting their hero at the NBA All-Star Weekend. Perhaps the 3-Point Shootout will lead to a shoulder injury that will hamper him for the rest of his days. Perhaps Dion Waiters will charge over Kyrie at the Rookies vs. Sophomores game, slicing through his teammate's ACLs in the process. Or maybe the misery will come in the All-Star Game itself, when Kyrie becomes so bored watching LeBron dribble away the shot clock at the top of the key, that he decides professional basketball is no longer his calling. In any case, it was fun while it lasted.

The Cavs are back at it tonight, hosting the 32-18 Denver Nuggets at the Q.

