

Cavs At The Quarter Pole: The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}

Sunday, December 10 2006 7:00 PM -

With the Cavaliers at 12-7, and approaching the quarter pole, Cavs writer John Hnat takes a second for us today to analyze the season so far. There's been some pleasant surprises, mild disappointments, and missed opportunities. And the Cavs are on pace for right around the same win total as last season (50). John has been money on the bank for us this year on the Cavs beat, and this is another excellent piece from this talented writer.



THE SUMMARY:

OK, it's not quite a quarter of a season yet, but it's close enough. After drubbing the Indiana Pacers 107-75 in a game that was not as close as the final score would have you believe, the Cavs find themselves at 12-7 after 19 games. That record puts them at second place in the Central Division, a half-game behind the Detroit Pistons (losing Ben Wallace has really hurt them, huh?), and third overall in the conference (behind the Pistons and the Orlando Magic). That record would also clinch the season in the Atlantic Division, but that's another story.

Presently, only three Cavs (LeBron James, Larry Hughes, and Drew Gooden) are averaging double digits in points (although Zydrunas Ilgauskas and Damon Jones are both averaging 9.7 points per game). LeBron is putting up the MVP-type season we expected of him, with 27.3 points, 6.7 rebounds, and 6.8 assists per game. Gooden leads the team in rebounds with 8.7 per game.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE SEASON SO FAR:

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No Surprise Here: LeBron James. He has to be on the short list of MVP candidates. His numbers are actually down just a touch from the 2005-06 season, but that is because of less playing time (he is playing “only” 40 minutes per game this year) than it is because of any decline in his game. There's really nothing more to say about the guy; all of the superlatives have been used. As Cavs fans, we're fortunate to be in Year Four of the LeBron Era, and we can only hope that it lasts as long as possible.

Look, It's A Bench!: Last year, two of the Cavs' high-profile free agent signings, and subsequent disappointments, were Jones and Donyell Marshall. They both appeared to be in something less than top shape, and they were both content to sit at the three-point line and launch bombs. (That fact was especially bothersome for Marshall, who is a 6-9 power forward.)

This year, Marshall and Jones have had much better seasons. While both of them are still prone to treating the three-point arc in the same way that Ray Liotta treated the edge of the baseball diamond in “Field of Dreams”, they have shown much more assertiveness and ability to make things happen within the paint. That comment comes at an especially auspicious time for Marshall, who just pulled down a season-high 17 rebounds in the last game against Indiana. Donyell is posting up more and appears to be much more active around the hoop. Jones has been much more effective as well; his .417 percentage from three point range shows how much better he is shooting the ball this season, and he has been much more willing to drive the ball or to pull up for a mid-range jumper instead of always settling for the three ball.

Finding Harrison Ford At The Lumberyard: The second round of the NBA draft is a complete crap shoot (emphasis on the first word of that phrase). Sure, it will cough up the occasional Gilbert Arenas or Desmond Mason, but most second rounders are lucky to be household names in their own households. You're much, much, much more likely to get a Ruben Boumtje-Boumtje than you are an Arenas.

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With that backdrop, the early returns on Cavs' second round pick Daniel Gibson (no, I am still not going to use his nickname) are very encouraging. With the vacuum created by Hughes' ankle injury and a death in David Wesley's family (his jump shot), Gibson has received some playing time, and he has made the most of it. He has shown nice range on his jumper (his .444 percentage from three point range leads the team and leads all NBA rookies), can drive the ball, and plays pesky defense (look no further than his game against Toronto's T.J. Ford last week). It looks like the Cavs may have gotten themselves a player.

CAUTION: Offense Under Construction: To his credit, Coach Mike Brown recognized that one of the 2005-06 team's shortcomings was its lack of motion on offense. The typical offensive play that season was: LeBron dribbles the ball up court; he takes a few seconds to put on his Superman cap; he then either launches a deep ball or drives to the hoop. The other four guys would grab a popcorn and watch, much like the fans in attendance.

This season, the Cavs are showing much more motion on offense. We're seeing some screens, more cuts around the hoop, and generally more action. The training wheels haven't come off yet; and much like Rocky Balboa in "Rocky III" (I think it was that one; it was the one where Apollo Creed trains him to beat the snot out of the Mr. T character; I honestly don't care enough to look it up this moment), the Cavs often revert to their former selves later in the game. But the results through the first quarter of the season should have us cautiously optimistic. Much like Rome, a quality NBA offense isn't built in a day. We may not see what this offense can really do until March and April. I could live with that.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE SEASON SO FAR:

On Pace for 38 Games: Like clockwork, Larry Hughes went down with yet another injury. This time, it was a sprained ankle that knocked him out of 10 of the first 19 games. It's not news that the major knock against Hughes is that he can't stay healthy. What is news is that he found yet another way to depart the lineup. It's true (and supposedly it's a source of some comfort) that Hughes always seems to have a different injury, as opposed to a repetitive one. That being said, he has missed more games for the Cavs than he has played, and the reason why is of little consolation.

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Make no mistake about it: a healthy Larry Hughes makes a huge difference to this team. With Hughes available, the Cavs are 7-2; without him, they're 5-5. The Cavs need Hughes if they are going to be playing in May and June. Keep drinking your milk and taking your vitamins, Larry.

Backcourt Blues: Especially with Hughes out, the Cavs' guards have been a sore spot throughout the first quarter of the season. Eric Snow has been his usual brickilicious self; his .475 field goal percentage does not tell the story of how erratic his outside jumper is (even though teams usually give him a cushion of at least ATM distance whenever he spots up). To be fair to Snow, he has looked like a different player on offense the past couple of weeks, driving aggressively to the hoop and drawing more fouls. Let's hope it is a trend that continues.

The Cavs brought in David Wesley to bolster the backcourt. Unfortunately, that signing has worked out about as well as the Lucious Harris signing a couple of years ago. (In other words, it hasn't.) Wesley has averaged 1.8 points per game (while shooting a horrendous .235 percentage from the field), and seems to have fallen out of the rotation. He averaged almost 10 points per game last season, so his decline has been rather precipitous.

First-round pick Shannon Brown clearly has skills, but they are not translating into production yet. (he's scoring 2.5 points per game while shooting a hair over 30% from the field). Gibson has passed him by in the rookie derby, and Shannon is going to have to show some game relatively soon if he is going to get more than token playing time this season.

Not Regular Or Predictable; Erratic: That's how the dictionary defines "inconsistent". They may want to include a picture of Drew Gooden and Sasha Pavlovic as illustration.

I've been a big Gooden supporter, but the big guy's ups and downs are becoming worrisome. He got out of the gate very quickly this year; at one point, I even suggested that

he could be a dark horse All-Star candidate

. Since that column, Gooden has made me look like a genius by falling off the face of the earth. He has had multiple games where he has scored zero points, and several others in the single digits. Some of that can be laid at the feet of the coaching staff (more on that shortly), but not all.

Pavlovic has been the same Sasha Pavlovic that we've come to know the past two seasons. In other words, he is actually two different Sasha Pavlovics, and much like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates, you never know which one you're gonna get. There is Good Sasha: a productive player who has a nice-looking outside shot that goes in and who drives fearlessly to the hoop. Then there's Bad Sasha: a player who has a nice-looking outside shot that draws rim and who drives fearlessly over opposing defenders to draw mass quantities of charges. After a string of about six games where we saw Good Sasha, leading us to wonder if Good Sasha is the Real Sasha, Bad Sasha has returned and is making up for lost time.

Speaking Of Inconsistent: The coaching staff deserves some raspberries for getting away from its offensive plan throughout games. More often than not, the game begins with the theme of Get The Ball To The Big Men. So the first four or five possessions feature pounding the ball inside to Gooden or (more typically) Zydrunas Ilgauskas. After those first couple of minutes, the Cavs seem to lose all interest in working the ball inside – almost like they have hit some imaginary quota and can now return to “bombs away!” from long range.

Another example: the Cavs have periodically run screens from Hughes or Jones. They'll run a couple of screens, leading to wide open shots ... and then they will abandon the idea. If something works, keep doing it until the other team shows they can stop it. (Ask Willie Parker and the Browns' defense about that one.)

The underlying problem is that the team is far too content to rely on outside jumpers for their production. That's a very difficult way to win games in the NBA. At best, if you are shooting well, you'll scratch out a close game (see the 95-91 win over the Raptors last week). The breaking point seems to be about 20 three point attempts per game. If the Cavs are at or over 20 three pointers, they're going to have a difficult time winning.

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WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The next quarter definitely gets tougher; it should show us whether the Cavs can continue playing up to the level of quality competition. In January, the Cavs will have a stretch of 9 road games (out of 10) on the road, with the lone home game against a division leading team. (Then again, that team is the Nets; I was just exaggerating the facts for effect.) That stretch is bracketed by home games against two other division leading teams (and this time, we are actually talking about good teams – Orlando and San Antonio). If the Cavs hit the halfway point of the season with more than 25 wins, it'll be quite an accomplishment.

We have a developing contest between Ira Newble and Scot Pollard, in that both have gone scoreless for the season thus far. Which one will score first? Stay tuned. (I would suggest some kind of chalupa-based promotion for celebrating their first points of the season, but there's no way that the announcing duo of Fred McLeod and Scott Williams would be able to wrap their arms around the concept. Between the usual chalupa promotion and the ongoing saga of "Hang On Sloopy", those guys have more than enough on their plate right now.)