

Cavs/Magic: The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}

Saturday, December 16 2006 7:00 PM -

The up and down play of the Cavaliers continued this weekend as the team stomped the Sonics at home, and then laid an egg in Orlando, scoring just 74 points in an ugly loss. Our man on the Cavs beat, John Hnat, recaps the weekends action breaking down both games for us ... and providing the good, the bad, and the summary.



THE SUMMARY:

The Cavs split a pair of games this weekend, trouncing the Ray Allen-less Seattle SuperSonics at home on Friday night, 106-84, and then losing to the Magic in Orlando, 74-81. The Cavs are now 14-9 on the season, a half game behind the Detroit Pistons for the lead in the division, and just barely ahead of the surging Bulls (winners of nine of their last ten games) and Pacers. In the Sonics game, the Cavs were led by Larry Hughes' 25 points, with LeBron James adding 22 and Zydrunas Ilgauskas lumbering his way to 17. Against the Magic, LeBron led the Cavs with 29, and Hughes and Drew Gooden added 14 apiece.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAMES:

I am tempted to just say that I liked Friday's game and didn't like Saturday's game, and leave it at that. But (1) that's not entirely accurate, and (2) Swerb would bitch at me for giving

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him nothing to run. It would be like the movie version of "The Firm", in which Tom Cruise takes all of the government's money to help them bust the Mafia (excuse me, it's the 2000s now ... I meant to say the "Italian-based organized syndicate of less than legal activity"), then leaves them with a skimpy folder that shows their lawyers were guilty of over-billing (which is like "proving" that grass is green). So let's get to the breakdown.

They Played Four Good Quarters...: The Cavs deserve huge props for Friday night's win. They grabbed control early (leading 10-2 three minutes into the game and 35-28 after the first quarter) and then never let up. They really won the game in the second quarter, scoring 29 points to the Sonics' 17, good for a 19 point lead at the half. The entire game, the Cavs played inspired defense and crisp offense (they had 27 assists, well above their season average of 21). The one time that Seattle did make a small run to get back in the game, with a Luke Ridnour drive cutting the Cavs' lead to 13 at 66-53, the Cavs responded with a 19-8 run to extend their lead to 24 points by the end of the third quarter.

The fourth quarter was mostly about seeing when the fans in attendance would get their free chalupas (note to the Fox Sports Ohio broadcast team: that happens when the Cavs score 100 points or more at The Q). The Cavs did provide a measure of suspense, as LeBron and Eric Snow both missed jumpers to keep the point total stuck at 98. LeBron then drove the lane and hit a finger roll to get the century mark and earn every ticket holder the right to one of Taco Bell's finest.

...And Added A Fifth For Good Measure: The Cavs picked up where they left off on Saturday evening, charging to a 23-12 lead at the end of the first quarter against the Magic. They were admittedly helped by the Magic's inability to hit the simplest of shots. Had the two teams been playing H-O-R-S-E, the Magic would have been stuck on "H" for a really long time. By my count, Orlando missed eight layups/tips/otherwise point-blank shots during the quarter. Some of the credit goes to the Cavs' defense. Ilgauskas in particular was playing like a madman during that quarter – he blocked one Dwight Howard layup, altered the course of several other shots, and grabbed five rebounds during the game's opening minutes.

Friday Night Larry: Hughes has taken no small amount of criticism since arriving in Cleveland as a high-priced free agent. He's been hurt much of the time, and has rarely put up the 20-plus points per game that the Cavs thought they were buying. On Friday evening,

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Hughes gave us one of those glimpses into what could be. Hitting jumper after jumper for a game-high 25 points ... playing tight defense ... running the floor on fast break after fast break ... Hughes looked terrific.

D-CAF! Uh, D-FENSE! The Cavs played very good defense in both games; 84 points to the Sonics and 81 points to the Magic represents a pair of solid performances. That'll normally get you a pair of wins. The team is doing very well with rotating to the ball and not allowing a lot of uncontested shots, as was true earlier in the year. The Cavs presently have the third stingiest defense in the league, surrendering just over 92 points per game (only Houston and San Antonio allow less).

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAMES:

Saturday Night Larry: As good as he was on Friday night, Hughes was equally as bad on Saturday evening. He did score a respectable 14 points, but took 17 shots (of which he hit only 5) to do it. The capper came with about six minutes left, when Hughes blew an easy layup. You know how announcers will talk about a "heat check" for a player, when he takes a somewhat ill-advised shot after hitting several in a row? That layup was an "ice check" for Larry. The basketball gods were saying, "Larry, let's give you as easy a shot as we can find, and see if you can get back on track" ... and Hughes still missed it. In the spirit of *The Glass Is Half Full*, I will say that Hughes shot a combined 16 for 33 over the two games, just a touch below 50%.

Saturday Night Everyone Else, Too: Gooden, 6 for 16 from the field. Ilgauskas scoring only 9 points. The entire bench scoring a total of 8 points on 2 for 10 shooting from the field. Eric Snow missing all 10 shots he took – 5 from the field, 4 from the line officially, and an additional missed free throw in which a lane violation bailed him out. (It was a variation on the old ABA free throw rule – in Snow's case, it was "Three To Make Zero".) A grand total of 13 assists for the team, well below their average. Getting out-rebounded, 48-38 (they normally out-rebound opponents by six a game). Turning the ball over 19 times (the norm is more like 14-15). Are you getting the picture of how bad the team played against Orlando?

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Hey Mike, The Clipboard Is Not Just A Drink Holder: Orlando has a tough defense; I understand that. With that being said, any time you take a time out so you can diagram the next play, you should be able to devise something that provides a good look at the basket. Maybe you hit the shot, maybe you don't; but at least you should get a good opportunity.

After a Trevor Ariza dunk gave Orlando a 35-30 lead, Coach Mike Brown called a time out. On the ensuing possession, the Cavs showed an impressive array of standing around and passing the ball around the perimeter. The result was a 20 foot Snow jumper with two seconds remaining on the shot clock. Their next possession was a Xerox: little movement, the ball finds itself in Snow's hands with the shot clock winding down, and Snow has to launch a shot from a distance outside his range. (Some would argue that a layup would be "outside his range"; I think we can all agree that 20 footers are not Eric's forte.) This second shot put hit nothing other than the backboard, leading to a 24 second violation. What exactly was Coach Brown diagramming during the stoppage in play?

And Then The Referee Hit LeBron James With A Steel Chair For Good Measure: Referees rarely play a part in the outcome – much less often than most fans think. That said, there was one sequence during the fourth quarter of the Orlando game that really seemed to turn the tide. The Cavs had clawed their way back to a three-point deficit, at 59-56, with approximately nine minutes remaining in the game. Orlando point guard Keyon Dooling, attempting to pass to a teammate (I believe it was Tony Battie, but could be wrong), threw the ball out of bounds. The ball appeared to glance off Battie's hand (or replace his hand with the hand of the correct player, in case I have his identity wrong, as mentioned). The replay showed that the ball touched absolutely nothing on its trip out of bounds. LeBron James was reasonably close to the play (as in, "he was in the same zip code"), but did not come close to touching the ball.

However, the referees could not determine whether the ball had glanced off LeBron. After conferring, they called for a jump ball. On the ensuing jump, Ilgauskas tapped the ball to a teammate. That was whistled off, and the refs called for a second jump. Ilgauskas won that one too, but the refs whistled him for a loose ball foul. (In more than 25 years of watching the NBA, I have never seen a player get whistled for a loose ball foul on a jump ball. Just saying.)

Dooling drained a three pointer on the consequent Orlando possession. The next time down the floor, LeBron was hit with an offensive foul for apparently getting in the way of the Orlando defender who was bear-hugging him. The Cavs never recovered from the shift in momentum.

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The sequence had a vague pro wrestling feel to it; I was waiting for the Orlando coach to distract the ref while Dwight Howard clobbered LeBron with a foreign object pulled out of his shorts.

The Daily Fox Sports Ohio Whine: Something that I have yet to mention, but that FSO is good to do at least once a game: they will show a replay of some recent play, but do it while the game is continuing. As a result, we as the viewers miss some of the action. Drives me nuts.

Last night, they got it out of the way early. With the score tied at 2, Snow drove to the hoop, and missed a contested layup. Gooden was there to get the rebound and the put-back. It was a nice play, but nothing that would make the top 500 plays for SportsCenter on a given evening. Apparently, though, the FSO producers viewed this play the same way that a drowning man eyes a life preserver, as they showed the replay in detail. In doing this, they completely neglected to show the live action, in which LeBron drove the ball to the hoop (I am going by the play-by-play replay for this information; he could have turned his back to the basket and tossed it in, Moondog-style) for a 6-2 lead.

(You readers who don't like digressions, please skip ahead to the next bold heading.) The FSO love for replays at the expense of live action reminds me of parents (almost always fathers) who have to record every minute of their childrens' lives with their omnipresent camcorders. Go to any youth league soccer game (that phrase alone has me shuddering; I do not use the "S" word lightly), and you're sure to see at least a couple of guys capturing every moment of the action. They're moving around and choreographing shots as though they are borderline Steven Spielberg. ("Look! Tyler's picking his nose! I'm gonna run onto the field so I can get the reverse angle shot!") While they are so enamored with *recording* the events, they're forgetting to *live*

the events in the first place. And so it is with FSO. Maybe it's just me, but I'd rather see everything once, than certain things multiple times and then others not at all. (And no, I do not own a camcorder, largely for these reasons.)

Returning to Moondog for a moment: Swerb (who must be Moondog's brother) has said multiple times that Moondog always hits at least one of the half-court shots that he takes

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during timeouts. Well, on Friday evening, Moondog took four cracks at it, and missed all of them, with only one of the shots being reasonably close. (Was he foreshadowing the Cavs' rim-bending Saturday night performance?)

Friday Night Wasn't Perfect Either: Try as I might, I can't say too much bad about the game against the Sonics. I can say that the end of Coach Brown's bench did not do what he wanted them to. Early in the fourth quarter, with the lead in the 20-25 point range, Coach Brown pulled all of his starters and sent in the mop-up crew, culminating with the Human Victory Cigar, Ira Newble, being put into the game with about eight minutes left and the Cavs holding a 94-68 lead. Three minutes later, that 26 point lead had been cut to a 15 point lead. Taking no chances, Coach Brown put the varsity (LeBron, Hughes, Snow, and Ilgauskas) back into the game. It wasn't a huge issue, and it did not affect the ultimate outcome, but it would have been nice to see the end of the bench do their job, and allow the starters to rest up.

Speaking of Newble, the Ira-Scot Pollard "Who Will Score First?" contest reached a pinnacle of drama. Newble caught a pass near the hoop and put the ball on the rim, where it tantalizingly stayed for a moment, then fell off. Newble did not get another shot the rest of the night, so the game continues. Had Pollard been activated for the game, I think he would have broken the scoreless streak. Then again, I have always been something of a Pollard pimp, so I am probably biased here.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs get a few days to lick their wounds before hitting the hardwood next Wednesday against the Nets in New Jersey, where Jay-Z's appearance at courtside will fuel another round of "LeBron to the Nets after his contract expires!" rumors. They then return home to take on the Pistons on Thursday evening, completing their set with the Eastern Conference's division leaders.