

## Cavs/Hawks - The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}

Wednesday, December 27 2006 7:00 PM -

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The Cavs played great defense last night, controlling their game at Atlanta from wire to wire, shutting down Joe Johnson in the process. The resurgence of Big Z continued, as did the season long scoreless drought between Newble and Pollard, which is getting pretty fun to track. The man, the myth, the Hnat gives us the 411 on last nights win.



### THE SUMMARY:

“Hmmm. We've lost our last four games on the road. What can we do to fix that problem?”

“I know! We'll travel to Atlanta, site of our last win away from home! That'll get us up and running again!”

And so it was. The Cavs pounded the Hawks, 89-76. LeBron James had 27 points and 9 rebounds, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas posted another double-double, this time with 16 points and 10 rebounds. Zaza Pachulia topped the Hawks with 22 points. Joe Johnson, the Hawks' leading scorer, was held to 10 points, his lowest total for the season.

### WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

**Taking Away What You Do Best:** To borrow an NFL reference, the Patriots' Bill Belichick has been quoted as saying that he likes to take away the one thing that an opponent does best. Maybe you have other weapons, and maybe you can beat him with those weapons; but he's going to force you to do that, instead of allowing you to win the way that you usually do.

Coach Mike Brown and the rest of his staff seemed to have a little Belichick in them last night. They planned their game to stop Johnson, the Hawks' primary offensive threat. They switched several defenders (usually Eric Snow, Larry Hughes, and Damon Jones; occasionally, LeBron got involved too) on Johnson, and made sure to collapse an extra defender towards him whenever Johnson threatened to drive to the hole. The results are there in the boxscore: 10 points on 4-of-17 shooting, only two free throw attempts. The results were also apparent on the court, as an increasingly frustrated Johnson tossed up ever more desperate shots.

The Cavs dared the Hawks to beat them with somebody other than Johnson. Aside from Pachulia, who stepped forward with 22 points, the Hawks did not have an answer.

**One Z:** The reports of the death of Z's career have been greatly exaggerated. A couple of weeks ago, the Cavs' coaching staff apparently dedicated itself to re-establishing Z as an inside presence. This effort is paying off. Z's double-double last night was his third in the past four games, and the big guy generally seems more active and involved. He blocked a couple of shots, came up with a couple of steals, drew two charges, and earned some floor burns diving for loose balls. He shot 8 of 13 from the floor and stayed out of the foul trouble that has plagued him so often.

**Timing Is Everything:** If you don't believe me, just ask [the guy who wrote this article](#) . The Cavs jumped out to an early double-digit lead, then withheld a number of charges by the Hawks. Several times, the Hawks were able to get the lead back into the single digits, and cut the lead down to six points at one juncture. Every time, however, the Cavs answered with a big play or a run.

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Consider: when the Hawks did cut the lead to six (at 56-50), Larry Hughes answered with a huge three pointer. After the teams traded baskets, LeBron then hit one of those shots that only LeBron, and maybe ten other guys in the history of the Association, could have hit. Falling out of bounds towards the baseline, LeBron jumped, looking to pass. Not seeing any option he liked (presumably, this meant that Snow was wide open), LeBron decided in mid-air to take the shot instead. From twenty feet. Falling out of bounds. *Swish*. If the little LeBron had been sitting on the wall with his scoreboard, he would have given it a ten.

Later, with about eight minutes remaining in the game, the Hawks cut the lead to eight points. On the next two possessions, the Cavs answered with a Hughes jumper and a Gooden dunk. A minute later, after the Hawks' Shelden Williams stole an errant pass from Snow, Hughes stole the ball from Johnson, avoided two other Hawks with nifty behind-the-back dribbles, and then drained a jumper to push the Cavs' lead to 14 points with five minutes remaining. Game over.

**It's All Ball Bearings Nowadays:** How can you not flash back to "Fletch" and the infamous quote "he's six-foot-five, six-nine with the Afro" whenever you see the Hawks' Josh Childress? (Incidentally, I charged my tickets to last night's game to the Underhills' account. Want the number?)

**Five Feet Is Better Than Twenty-Five Feet:** More than once, I have mentioned that the Cavs get themselves into the most trouble when they stand around the perimeter and launch long shots. My proxy for measuring this tendency has been the number of three point attempts per game; when the Cavs are getting into the high teens or twenties in the number of threes taken, then you know they are in trouble. Last night, the Cavs took only six three point shots (they hit three). Not coincidentally, they won rather easily.

This is not to say that three pointers are evil or that they should never be attempted. It is to say that three pointers are a dessert, not the main course. And while it may seem fun to eat nothing but dessert, you're going to make yourself sick rather quickly.

### WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

**Like It's A Fricking Bakery:** Yes, that's how many turnovers the Cavs produced last night. They had 19 turnovers, a figure that is barely acceptable only because the Hawks turned the ball over even more (22 times). Whenever the Cavs were on the verge of breaking the game wide open, they let the Hawks back into it by giving them extra possessions.

For example, in the first quarter, the Cavs stormed out to a 26-10 lead. After a Pachulia three point play (more on him in a moment), the Cavs brought the ball up court. Trapped on the right side, Drew Gooden wisely sought out the open man. Unfortunately, that open man was thirty feet away from Drew, on the other side of the court. Childress (all six-five, er, six-nine of him) stole Gooden's wayward pass and drove the distance of the court for an easy layup. On the next possession, Pachulia stole the ball from Varejao as though he were mugging a small child for his lunch money.

I can deal with turnovers, to an extent. But too many of them, especially when most of them seemed to come on poor and/or ill-advised passes, causes large objects to get thrown at TVs all throughout the greater Cleveland area.

**Two Zs:** I have to confess that I cannot stand Pachulia (and not just because he is actually a pretty talented player who was available last off-season and who would have helped the Cavs). I can't stand him because of who he represents.

We all know this guy. We've all played against him at the local rec center. He's the guy with perma-sweat, the one who is already dripping wet while you're taking free throws to determine the teams. He's the one that nobody wants to guard, because the combination of that sweat and his backne means that you'll get slimed whenever you have to man up on him. And you will

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get slimed, because his level of physicality falls somewhere between “Ultimate Fighting Championship” and “Marines landing on Iwo Jima”. He's the guy who will get the ball in the post, elbow you in the chest as he turns around, and then whines about getting fouled. He's the guy who will go over your back for a rebound, then grumbles about you getting in his way, as though he has a divine right to the ball.

Man, I can't stand him. Although I suspect I could if he were a Cav.

**Can An Entire Bench Wear The Red And White Striped Shirt?:** The Cavs' bench totaled 15 points last night. That's rather low. I'll give a pass to Damon Jones and Donyell Marshall, who contributed in other ways (Marshall with his nine rebounds in only 15 minutes, Jones with his energetic and pesky defense on Johnson). Anderson Varejao and Daniel Gibson, on the other hand, looked lost out there. Varejao is definitely going through a slump, as his four points (actually, not that low for him), three rebounds (more disconcerting) and general lack of involvement in the game attest. Gibson threw two of the “what the \*(&^\$#&\* are you doing?!?” passes described earlier; perhaps reacting to that, he threw only safe outlet passes to teammates on the perimeter every time he touched the ball after that. Gibson has the talent to be an effective player – a nice dribble, a respectable outside shot – so it is frustrating to see him settle for so little.

**No Ira, No Scot:** Ira Newble and Scot Pollard were both inactive for the game. That means that neither of them scored last night (note the laser-sharp analysis there), continuing their season-long “duel” to see who will be the first to put something other than a zero on the scoresheet. That in itself is not a bad thing; in fact, I'd kind of prefer that they continue their “battle”. It gives me something to write about. From the perspective of bandwidth, the best outcome is for both men to continue pulling goose eggs until the 82<sup>nd</sup> game of the year, when one of them finally breaks the drought. (It would be even more epic if the basket comes off a goof by the other – e.g., Newble misses a dunk, then Pollard puts back the resulting rebound.) No, the bad part was that by being inactive for the game, all of the drama was gone before the opening tipoff.

**WHAT LIES AHEAD:**

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A whole lot of airports, bus rides, and room service. The Cavs return home to play the Bucks this Friday night, then close out the year at Chicago this Saturday. After returning home to play the Spurs next Tuesday, the Cavs will then play nine of their following ten games on the road. This stretch will likely define the Cavs' season – we'll see whether the team can pull it together and get back on track for 50-plus wins. (Last night's game puts the Cavs at 16-11, or 48-win pace.)