

Cavs/Nets - The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}
Saturday, January 06 2007 7:00 PM -

The Cavs won their fourth game in five nights, beating the Nets 96-91 to move to 21-12 on the season ... the best record in the Eastern Conference. Like the previous night against Milwaukee, the Cavs dominated the last six minutes of the game, sucking it up despite weary legs caused by a tough stretch from the schedule makers. The Cavs now head to the left coast for a seven game Western Conference road trip.



THE SUMMARY:

Make it four in a row for the Cavs. They held off the New Jersey Nets 96-91, and in so doing improved their record to 21-12, the best in the Eastern Conference. It was not the prettiest win in team history – the Cavs held a 16 point lead in the second quarter, but New Jersey pared the deficit to eight by halftime. Then in the fourth quarter – much like the Cavs did against Milwaukee the previous night – the Nets finally broke through and took their first lead in a long time about halfway through the quarter, at 81-78.

Unlike the Bucks the previous evening, the Cavs pulled themselves together and responded. Cleveland scored 13 of the next 17 points to take a 91-85 lead with a little over a minute remaining. The game came down to the free throw drill in the final minute (New Jersey's Richard Jefferson hit a three pointer and also had a three point play on an inexplicable foul by LeBron James), and the Cavs hit enough of them to make the home locker room at Quicken Loans Arena a happy place.

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For the second straight game, somebody other than LeBron led the Cavs in scoring, as Drew Gooden (coming off his 31 point/16 rebound effort against Milwaukee the previous evening) and Larry Hughes both had 21 points. LeBron had 19 points and a game-high 13 rebounds, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas also had 16. Vince Carter and Mikki Moore (*Mikki Moore?*) led the Nets with 18 points apiece, and Jefferson added 17.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

It's Beginning To Look A Lot Like April: One of the keys to the Cavs' success last season was their terrific record in close games, especially in the later part of the season and in the playoffs. In game after game, they played particularly good ball in the waning moments, and often eked out victories.

The 2006-07 Cavs are starting to take on that aspect of last year's team. They were particularly impressive in not folding their tents after New Jersey, after three quarters of trying, finally broke through to take the lead in the fourth quarter. They stepped up their defense (including two steals by LeBron, one of which led to an easy reverse dunk at the other end), got some fast breaks (the dunk by LeBron, a layup by Hughes), and grabbed the lead right back from the Nets.

Yesterday, I wrote that the Cavs were emerging from their early-season cocoon. The Nets game was another step in that direction. They are looking like the team that some of us (no names) predicted would [win 57 games](#).

But He's Still Not An All-Star: In [my review of the previous night's game against the Bucks](#), I lauded Gooden for his strong performance, but also noted his inconsistency throughout the season, and wondered if I had just doomed him to a week of sub-par performances. Gooden certainly didn't act like he was jinxed last night, as his 21 points and 12 rebounds gave him his third consecutive double-double. It was the sixth time this year that Gooden has had 20 or more points in a game.

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As was the case against the Bucks, Gooden had his best stretch in the waning moments of the game:

- A jump hook with 4:54 remaining to give the Cavs an 83-81 lead, one that they would not relinquish;
- A huge dunk with 1:59 left to extend the Cavs' lead to four points, at 89-85. Gooden faked a jumper from about 17 feet, causing the Nets' Moore to jump high in the air in a shot-blocking attempt; he then dribbled by Moore and powered his way to the rim;
- Three of four free throws in the final seconds;
- Three big defensive rebounds along the way.

Gooden is emerging as a solid option, particularly on those nights when LeBron does not quite have his top game. Is he finally figuring out the game? Could the reverse soul patch that he is growing on the back of his head has powers beyond our comprehension?

Timing Is Everything: While Damon Jones hit only three field goals (two of them three-pointers) during the game, he sure picked opportune times to make them. His first three-pointer, at the outset of the second quarter, gave the Cavs a 30-21 lead, igniting a 13-3 run. His second make from beyond the arc gave the Cavs a 65-60 lead after New Jersey had trimmed the lead to two. And his other basket (a garden-variety jumper) also came after the Nets had cut the Cavs' lead to two. It wasn't quite as impressive as the

[bulletproof Miracle Bra](#)

; eight-point games are not that noteworthy. Jones just seemed to hit his shots at particularly opportune points in the game.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

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Bay of Cavs: John F. Kennedy was widely lauded for his handling of the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) in 1962. However, a college professor of mine (Tom Bogart, if you're out there reading this ... how have you been?) sneered at the praise heaped on Kennedy. His stance was that Kennedy's heroics were necessary only because he had so wretchedly botched previous events (most notably the [Bay of Pigs invasion](#) the previous year), thereby creating the situation that required a heroic response. Without debating whether that particular instance is true, I have always been impressed by that concept – while it is nice to respond strongly during a tough time, it's even nicer to not let the tough time develop in the first place.

These ramblings do have a point: the Cavs made the game much tougher than it had to be, as they blew a 16 point lead that they had taken midway through the second quarter (at 42-26). New Jersey then went on a 12-4 run to cut the lead to eight points by halftime, and then further sliced the lead to three in the opening moments of the third quarter. The Cavs' defense was porous both inside (giving up several dunks and layups to Moore) and out (New Jersey hit three three-pointers during these minutes, including two by Kidd).

I'm not faulting the team for not extending its 16 point lead. It takes quite a bit of energy to sustain a run like that, and it's rare for the other team to never respond. But are we asking too much for some sustained defensive intensity?

They're Watching The Tape: One of Coach Mike Brown's defensive tendencies is to bring one of his big men out past the three-point line to double-team the opposition's ball handler. Said big man will then go back to guarding his man, usually getting there with the grace and speed of a hippo on Valium. New Jersey must have seen this tendency, because whenever Ilgauskas or Gooden would step out, whoever they were guarding would go under the hoop. New Jersey got several easy dunks and layups as a result. Most of those were by Moore; I don't know if the Cavs just decided to let Moore try to beat them, and that they would have reacted differently had the opposition's big man had a more impressive pedigree. Regardless, it does seem to be a weakness that teams are beginning to exploit.

I'll Keep Saying It: The Cavs are a poor free throw shooting team – in fact, they're the

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worst in the league, hitting just over 69% of their attempts -- and they will continue to make games much harder than they need to be if they continue to Rodman their throws off the rim. They were 17 of 26 from the line last night. Hit four or five more of those throws, and then you (meaning I) do not have to bite your (my) nails during the final minutes.

These observations are completely unscientific and may in fact be contradicted by the game logs, but they sure seem true to me (*Note to readers: That is your cue to research these items, then e-mail me with your findings. Don't worry, I'll give you credit.*)

:

- When Hughes drives to the rim, makes the basket, and draws a foul, he almost always bricks the resulting free throw. (He had one such attempt last night after giving the Cavs a 69-65 lead, and he missed it. What, did you think I was going to make a point and then have last night's game contradict it?)

- Whenever the opposition is whistled for a technical foul, and Damon Jones shoots the freebie, he tends to miss it. (Again, this happened late in the third quarter of last night's game.) Apparently, you can be the World's Greatest Shooter despite this tendency.

- If a Cav gets fouled in the act of shooting a three-pointer, he is guaranteed to miss at least one of the consequential three free throws, and probably will clang two of them. (Hughes went 1-for-3 in such a situation about halfway through the fourth quarter.)

- Whenever Anderson Varejao steps to the line, I curl on the floor in the fetal position. (He has actually improved this season, as his 64% average this year is significantly better than his career 56% rate. He didn't help either number last night, missing three of his six attempts.)

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs' road trip (their next seven games are away from home) begins in Sacramento on Tuesday evening. The Kings are 14-17 on the season after losing to Portland last night. The Cavs will then travel to Phoenix to take on Steve Nash and the Suns on Thursday.