

## The Missing

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, January 25 2007 7:00 PM -

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It



It's a long season, irrespective of the sport, and sometimes a loss is just a loss. But every so often a certain loss has a way of staying with you like an undercooked Stadium hot dog. Wednesday night's Cavs loss to Philadelphia seems to have fallen into that category.

In this regard, Terry Pluto's [column](#) in the Akron Beacon Journal was right on the mark. Something was missing in the Cavaliers performance against the hapless Philadelphia 76ers. Remember, Philadelphia is a depleted and dispirited team with one of the worst records in the league. They were playing on the road in the second of back-to-back games. That should spell rout no matter how the players are shuffled. Yet the Cavs found a way to keep Philadelphia around long enough to allow them to eek out the win.

If the Cavs underachieve this season, which seems to be the one constant in Cleveland sports that you can bank on, fans likely need not look beyond last night's game to figure out why. No matter what schemes, offensive or defensive, that head coach Mike Brown seems to employ, when the game is on the line the Cavs always look like just four guys in Cleveland uniforms standing around hoping LeBron James will do something great.

James, who had a season high 39 points Wednesday night, should have won the game in regulation but his final shot rattled out of the rim. In a way, though, it's probably a good thing the shot didn't go in. A last second victory likely would have masked what appear to be deepening problems with this team as it struggles to meet the accomplishments of last season.

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There were, of course, the usual culprits in last night's loss, poor defense and even worse offense. But those are the technicalities. The fact is that these players either cannot or will not respond to what Brown is asking of them. And that has to be of paramount concern to both GM Danny Ferry and owner Dan Gilbert.

The guess here is that Ferry is feverishly working to find this year's Flip Murray, a player who can come in and provide some sort of spark. That even may work again but it's starting to look like the issues are more systemic than that. But addressing these kinds of core issues is extremely difficult, particularly in the middle of the season. Moreover, it's not as if the exact problem is as obvious as they are for, say, the Cleveland Browns. Likely it has as much to do with the mix of players on this team as it does with Brown and his coaching style.

In many ways, it is reminiscent of the problems plaguing the Cleveland Indians, particularly last year. Just as with the Cavs and their offensive woes, it was easy to point to the Indians and say the problem, of course, was the bullpen. And while neither point is particularly wrong, the strong feeling is that something more fundamental was missing but pinpointing the source is proving to be just as elusive as finding good beer at reasonable prices.

Fortunately for the Cavs, the NBA's Eastern Conference is looking more and more like the weak sister to the Western Conference. Toronto leads the Atlantic Division despite playing less than .500 ball. Only two teams are above .500 in the Southeast Division while four teams in the Central are above that line, but all barely so. At this point in the season, none look to be even competitive with teams like Phoenix or Dallas.

But that's what makes this all the more frustrating. The Cavs have a golden opportunity to assert themselves as an elite team but continue to play down to their level of competition instead. True, just before embarking on their west coast swing the Cavs were playing their best basketball of the season. But even then you got the sense that there is no way they could rip off a string of 12 or 15 straight victories like both Phoenix and Dallas have done this season.

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But because the conference is so relatively weak, the Cavs do have the luxury of time to figure it out. With the joke of a system that passes for the post-season in the NBA, only the real drecks of the league, like the Cavs pre-LeBron, are likely to find themselves sitting at home when the regular season ends. But unless something dramatic happens and soon, Clevelanders are likely to once again find themselves watching a ticker tape parade being celebrated in some other city at season's end. And the real kick is that even with their problems, the Cavs still are the best team Cleveland has to offer. Oy vey.