

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

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}
Sunday, January 28 2007 7:00 PM -

The Cavs fell 115-100 to the Suns yesterday, in a game nationally televised by ABC. The Cavs hung with Phoenix for three quarters before being blown away to start the fourth, allowing the Suns to walk across the finish line for their 17th straight win. The Cavs perimeter defense was atrocious in this one, and John Hnat, who was there at courtside to take it in for us, checks in with all the gory details this morning. This IS the best Cavs column in existence, in print or on the web.



THE SUMMARY:

Cleveland fell to the Phoenix Suns, 115-100, in a nationally televised game, which means that the entire nation had the chance to see just how much the Cavs need to improve. LeBron James showed no effects from the injured toe that kept him out of Friday's game at Philadelphia, as he led all scorers with 30 points. Drew Gooden had another double-double as he scored 19 points and grabbed a game-high 14 rebounds, and Donyell Marshall came off the bench to score 15. No other Cavalier scored in double digits. Steve Nash and Shawn Marion each had 23 points for the Suns, who won their 17th game in a row to improve to a ridiculous 36-8. (How exactly was this team 1-4 after the first five games of the season?)

While the final score suggests that the game was something of a blowout, it was actually a rather close contest through three quarters. Cleveland led by as many as five points early on and held a 26-23 lead at the end of the first quarter. Phoenix took the lead for good early in the second quarter on a barrage of three-pointers from Nash (two), Leandro Barbosa, and

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Raja Bell. (The guy sitting in front of me left to take a leak when the Cavs were still up by five; he came back moments later after Nash's second trey gave the Suns a seven-point lead, and asked, "what the hell happened?")

Cleveland refused to roll over the way they did against Phoenix earlier this month, and rallied to cut the lead by two at halftime. (Somewhere out there, Austin Carr was saying, "if they can just cut it to five by the half, they'll be all right.") The Cavs did tie the game early in the third quarter on a Larry Hughes jumper, but Phoenix then rattled off nine points in a row. The teams trade baskets the rest of the way, with a three-pointer by Donyell Marshall cutting the lead to 91-87 at the end of the third quarter. However, Phoenix put the game away by scoring 12 of the first 14 points in the fourth quarter, and by the time Amare Stoudemire slammed home a dunk to extend the Suns' lead to 113-97, a good portion of the Cavs' fans were already waiting in their cars on the I-77 onramp.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

Another Double-Double: Gooden had a very impressive game. Eight of those 14 rebounds came at the offensive end, and his efforts gave Cleveland a sizable advantage (42-30) on the boards for the game. He also looked very comfortable posting up his man as well as shooting face-up jumpers. He even had a sweet drop-step move, although he wound up too far under the basket and the rim "rejected" his shot. Longtime readers of the column (also known as my wife) know that Gooden is certain to stink up arenas across the country if I keep praising him, so I will stop there.

Rumors, Greatly Exaggerated: Since my piece wondering if he was going to pull his game together, Marshall has put together a couple of very strong games. He not only scored 15 points today; he didn't do it by hiding at the three-point line and waiting for LeBron to kick the ball his way. In much the same way that he did against Philadelphia on Friday, Marshall established his inside game first, with a couple of hook shots from the paint and a drive or two to the basket. Those interior moves opened up the outside game for him, and he capitalized, hitting three three-pointers.

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Not Coaching By The Book: Give Coach Mike Brown credit for re-inserting Daniel Gibson into the game midway through the second quarter. Gibson picked up three quick fouls earlier in the game (one in which he made the unforgivable sin of breathing on Shawn Marion as Marion dunked). The Book (where is this book, anyway?) says that you sit Gibson until the third quarter. And Coach Brown did sit Gibson for a few minutes ... then put him back into the game with five minutes remaining in the half. Gibson made Coach Brown look like a genius by hitting a pair of three-pointers and assisting on two other baskets before the half was over.

Free Stuff!: The Cavs gave away 500-piece jigsaw puzzles to all fans attending the game. (I'm sure a few will pop up on eBay before too long, although none are there as of this writing.) Ours is about halfway put together as I write this, although I am quite confident that the cat has eaten at least two pieces while I've stepped away. Rather unique as professional sports giveaways go, and certainly a notch above Twelve Sponsors Crammed On The Back Magnet Night.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

This Is A Defensive Genius At Work?: As we've noted recently in this space, the Cavs' defense has been shredded repeatedly in recent weeks. They've fallen to seventh in the league in opposition points per game at 94.1, and their opponents' field goal percentage has risen to .450, which puts Cleveland ninth in the league. (Earlier in the season, the Cavs were among the league leaders in both categories.) Today's game won't help matters any, as Phoenix scored 115 points while shooting 57% from the field (including 46% from three-point range, which is ridiculous).

What really bothered me were two trends that cost the Cavs any numbers of baskets:

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1. Their defensive switches were hideous. Phoenix kept running picks at the three-point line. Every time – *every time* – the Cavs would switch defenders, with a big man defending a Suns guard on the perimeter while the Cavs' guards would try to fend off one of Phoenix's big men. In other words, Phoenix created two mismatches on almost every possession in the half-court set. More than once, we saw Daniel Gibson or Damon Jones trying to guard Amare Stoudemire. That's just wrong. Stoudemire would have scored 40 had he not been holding his sides and laughing hysterically so often. On the flip side, we also saw Zydrunas Ilgauskas or Drew Gooden stepping out on Steve Nash; also wrong. If it happens once or twice, so be it. If it happens as a regular pattern, then it must have been a deliberate strategy by the Cavs' coaching staff ... and it was about the worst decision since Sonny Corleone decided to take the toll road.

2. When the Cavs actually did have guards playing defense against Phoenix's guards ... stop it there. The whole problem is that they *weren't* playing defense against Phoenix's guards. If you're under six-foot-eight and you wear a Suns' uniform, chances are good that you can hit three-pointers like they are layups. I know this. You know this. But this fact seems to have eluded those brain cells responsible for Cleveland's defensive sets today. The Cavs' guards kept giving the Suns' guards room to shoot. And the Suns did. Boy, did they ever. Barbosa hit four three-pointers, and Nash and Raja Bell each made three.

Memo To Larry Hughes: You're back in your habit of shooting the ball on the way down. When you do that, you shoot 3-for-13 ... if you're hot.

Flashback to June 26, 2002: On that date, the Cavs selected Dajuan Wagner with the sixth pick in the 2002 NBA draft. A few minutes later, the Suns selected Stoudemire with the ninth overall selection. Well done, Jim Paxson and John Lucas!

Flashback to July 14, 2004: That's the day that Phoenix inked Nash to a six-year, \$63 million contract. It's not like the Cavs ever had any sort of a chance to sign Nash (thanks to a lack of sufficient salary cap room and a shortage of talent outside of LeBron; although I think they could have made a compelling case based on the warm Cleveland winters). But we see what Phoenix is getting for its \$60-some million with Nash ... and then compare it to what we are getting for our (well, Dan Gilbert's) \$60-some million with Hughes ... and that's yet another reason why Lucy pulling the football away from Charlie Brown is the official logo of Cleveland

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sports-dom.

Here's the real issue: once, before I go, I want to see Nash and LeBron James on the same team. I want Nash running the break while LeBron flies down the wing. I want to see a puddle appear below the shorts of the lone defender. Unfortunately for all basketball fans, it's very unlikely that LeBron and Nash will ever play on the same team. They almost certainly won't suit up for the same NBA team. (The lone possibility would have a petrified Nash signing his transition-to-retirement contract with Cleveland, say for the 2012-13 season; that doesn't count.) They're in different conferences, so an All-Star pairing isn't going to happen. And unless Nash renounces his Canadian citizenship or LeBron decides to move to Saskatchewan, they won't find themselves on the same international/Olympic team.

Every 19 Minnits, The Plaise Goes Crazee: Maybe it's just me, but I find it very odd that the Cavs would prominently display the misspelled name of a sponsor on its mini-scoreboards. I'm not a language commando or a spelling Nazi; I do not treat typos as a sign of moral weakness, nor do I lament the state of the public educational system every time I see a mistake. I just know that if I were Northfiled ... um, Northfield Park, I'd want an explanation.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs will try to notch their first home win since their West Coast trip when they face the Golden State Warriors at The Q on Tuesday evening. They'll then travel to Miami to face the struggling Heat on Thursday.