

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

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}
Monday, March 05 2007 7:00 PM -

Great win last night for the good guys, ruining the return of Yao Ming ... who missed a couple months with a knee injury. LeBron was simply amazing, Z came up huge late, Larry played well at the point again, and Shannon Brown continued to open eyes. This IS the best recurring Cavs column in existence. And it's written by a man named John Hnat.



THE SUMMARY:

Another day, another win over a quality opponent for the Cavs. This time it was Houston who played victim, as the Cavs beat the Rockets, 91-85. LeBron James led all scorers (yes, I want to see how many columns in a row I use those words; the streak is currently at four) with 32 points; he narrowly missed a triple-double, as he also grabbed 12 rebounds and passed his way to eight assists. Larry Hughes wasn't that far from triple-double territory himself, with 22 points, six caroms, and seven helpers. Tracy McGrady, who knows a good shot (i.e., one he takes) when he sees one, topped Houston with 25 points. Yao Ming picked this game to make his return from a broken leg; he battled his way to 16 points and 11 rebounds.

The Cavs seemed to have the game in hand in the fourth quarter, after a Donyell Marshall three-pointer off a broken play gave them a 76-62 lead with nine minutes to go. But the Rockets (who entered the game with a 36-23 record) refused to go away. A Yao three-point play chipped the lead to 11 ... then an offensive rebound and put-back by Kirk Snyder cut the margin to nine ... then a McGrady layup made it a seven point game ... and a McGrady three-point bomb trimmed the lead to four. The sellout crowd of 20,562, who were already disappointed because they knew they had zero chance at free chalupas (although Hiko might suggest that [avoiding Taco Bell is not a bad thing](#)), now had to consider that maybe they'd be sitting on Ontario after a disheartening loss.

Fortunately for the ribs of dogs all throughout the greater Cleveland metropolis, the Cavs recovered just in time. James hit one of his are-you-kidding-me 20 footers as the shot clock expired, and then Zydrunas Ilgauskas followed that up with a couple of baskets of his own (we'll

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talk more about those in a minute). The capper came with just under a minute remaining, as a LeBron alley-oop dunk gave the good guys an 88-82 lead. McGrady made it interesting by burying a three-pointer with 25 seconds to go, but Houston could not get any closer.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

I'll Let You In On A Secret: This LeBron kid. He's pretty good. I think he might make it in this league.

We're now at the eighth or ninth game in a row in which LeBron has been the dominant force in the game. The whispers about his toe and his tired legs have disappeared. He's back to taking the ball aggressively to the hoop, and rarely dribbling out the shot clock while catching his breath.

One aspect of his game that I really like: he has a sense of when the opponent is on the ropes, and looks to deliver a crushing blow. Early in the third quarter, with the Cavs leading by 11, Yao missed a jumper. LBJ plucked the rebound, dribbled down the court ... then pulled up for a three-pointer. *Swish.* With the momentum completely on Cleveland's side, Houston had no choice but to call a time out.

And A Seven Foot Lithuanian Shall Lead Them: The stat sheet shows that LeBron and Hughes (who had his second strong game in a row, thus putting a dent in my one-good-game-a-month theory) led the Cavs. The stat sheet also shows that Ilgauskas had a relatively quiet night, with eight points and five rebounds.

The stat sheet does not tell the complete story.

Z had four huge plays in the final minutes that secured the win:

- After Houston cut the Cavs' double-digit lead to four points (82-78) with four minutes remaining, Z buried a critical jumper to push the lead back to six;
- On the next possession, Houston's Chuck Hayes got the ball in the lane for what appeared to be a sure layup. *Not in my crib*, said Z. (We're assuming that seven foot Lithuanians have internal voices that speak Street.) Z blocked the shot against the glass and

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came away with the rebound;

- After McGrady cut the Cavs' lead to 84-82 with a minute and a half to go, LeBron attempted to answer with a jumper. He missed the shot. But Ilgauskas barreled down the right side of the lane, grabbed the rebound, and laid the ball back in;

- On Houston's next possession, McGrady missed a jumper (not a rare occurrence last night, as we discussed earlier). The ensuing rebound caromed to the free throw line, where Yao grabbed it (also not a rare occurrence last night, as we'll discuss momentarily). Yao drove the lane ... and Z reached across him and poked the ball away, leading to an LBJ dunk at the other end.

He still isn't quite where the Cavs need him to be, but without him down the stretch, they likely lose that game.

I Will Never Complain About Larry Hughes's Shooting Again: McGrady shot 10-of-32 from the field. Part of that was Tracy having a bad night (although he did heat up in the fourth quarter). Part of that was also some inspired defense. Early on, Sasha Pavlovic spent most of his time in McGrady's face, contesting every shot. Later, Eric Snow made sure that any shot McGrady took, he took with a hand in his face.

Sometimes The Best Moves...: A couple of years ago, the Cavs had the chance to sign Rafer Alston, streetball player extraordinaire. I recall some Cavs fans being disappointed when he ended up with Toronto (who later traded him to the Rockets). I hope those fans saw last night's game. Alston has one of the ugliest shots I've ever seen – and I lived through the Mike Sanders Era. Somehow, both of his field goals came from three-point range, although one was a buzzer-beating, off-the-backboard, everybody-including-the-guy-who-shot-it-rolls-their-eyes number. (Lest you think his shooting last night was an anomaly, he is a career 38% shooter, and has been right around that number in both of his seasons with Houston.)

Let Youth Be Served: Shannon Brown: 13 minutes. David Wesley: DNP-Coach's Decision. Damon Jones-inactive. This is a Good Thing.

Brown continued to work his way into the rotation, hitting a three-pointer and scoring two other points on a strong drive to the basket on a fast break. He also played good defense, notching a couple of steals (one of them led to the fast break just mentioned). I've given the Fox Sports Ohio announcers plenty of grief this season, but I have to compliment them for correctly saying that Brown is playing much better now that he has slowed his game down a bit. (Then again, it's hard not to go at 78 RPMs when you know the coach will pull you for one mistake. Maybe some of the credit goes to Coach Mike Brown, for giving Shannon extended minutes, so that he is not always looking over his shoulder.)

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

Second Chances, Third Chances, Fourth Chances...: After winning the rebounding battle against Toronto the other evening, the Cavs were thoroughly creamed by the Rockets on the glass, with Houston grabbing 58 rebounds to Cleveland's 47. The disparity was particularly glaring at the offensive end, as Houston pulled down 19 offensive boards while the Cavs managed but eight.

The most egregious example came in the final minute. Cavs leading by six, Rockets have the ball. Shane Battier attempts a three-pointer from the left corner; had USX drawn that kind of iron, they'd still be a Flats powerhouse today. Both Hughes and Ilgauskas had a chance to get the ball, but they ended up hitting it to Houston's Luther Head. Head lined up a three pointer; he missed it as well. Houston grabbed yet another offensive rebound (this one by Yao, who is seven foot five and has the arms of a nine-footer); Yao kicked the ball out to McGrady, who buried a three-pointer.

I fully expect to get a call from my son's pre-school tomorrow asking me why he is yelling, "grab the God-damn ball!". Actually, it's more likely to be my three-year-old girl who will repeat Daddy's bad words. A few weeks ago, some DNA-challenged driver cut me off in a parking lot. I called him a name that I will not repeat here, except to say that it rhymed with "muckstick". My daughter, in the back seat, immediately repeated it. Nailed it, actually. Phonetics, intonation, clarity in pronouncing the letter "F" ... she had the whole enchilada. (*It's Gratuitous Taco Bell Reference Day here at TheClevelandFan.com.*

) As a parent, I was torn between the pride in my daughter's continuing speech development and the recognition that she sounded like a Mafia doll.

Anyway: the Cavs' inability to box out almost cost them this game. They are still one of the better rebounding teams in the league, but they have been getting out-rebounded quite often lately.

Just Sayin': Z and Drew Gooden again combined for zero free throws on the evening. Actually, all of the Cavs' big men treated the free-throw line as though it carried some fatal disease; Donyell Marshall and Anderson Varejao also did not make a single trip to the stripe. (Interestingly, only two Cavs – LeBron and Hughes – attempted any free throws during the game.)

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WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs travel to Detroit to face the Pistons Wednesday night, then continue their tour of the Central Division with games against Milwaukee on Saturday night and Indiana on Sunday (a rare 6:00 PM start).