

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

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}

Wednesday, March 07 2007 7:00 PM -

Hands down, last night's game was one of the best regular season NBA affairs I've ever saddled up for. No pre game hugs, playoff intensity, the two favorites in the East trading haymakers, and the Cavs emerging victorious with a thrilling OT win. And LeBron James ... good God almighty. What a game. I really hope you didn't miss this one. If you did, John will fill you in.



THE SUMMARY:

I'm sitting here, speechless after the most exhilarating game of the season. I'm trying to describe what just happened at the Palace of Auburn Hills. Out of a couple of hundred thousand words in the English language, here are the seven I am going to pick:

The Cleveland Cavaliers grew up last night.

The Cavs defeated the Detroit Pistons, 101-97, in the best game of the season thus far. It took a gritty fourth-quarter comeback and a nail-biter of an overtime to do it ... and we wouldn't have had it any other way.

There's no time to do the game description or the "who scored how many points" that usually appears before we get into The Good and The Bad. (Besides, how many times can I say "LeBron led all scorers...") Let's get down to business.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

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The Game We've Been Waiting For: A win? Check. On the road? Check. Against a top-shelf opponent? Check.

And the Cavs showed a lot of poise in getting it done. Let's fast forward through the first quarter, when Cleveland rode some uncanny shooting to a double-digit lead; through the second quarter, when they hit a cold spell and gave it back; and through the third quarter, when the two teams battled neck and neck and finished the stanza tied at 70.

So many times (*oh no, this is sounding like a Debby Boone song*), we've seen the Cavs fold in this situation. They come out flat at the outset of the final quarter, fall behind, and inevitably come up short. Last night, they started the fourth quarter reading straight from that script. Detroit's Chauncey Billups hit a jumper to start the quarter. Because Eric Snow brushed his elbow, a foul was called, and Billups completed the three-point play. After a Donyell Marshall traveling violation, Chris Webber hit a jump hook to extend the Detroit lead to five. A couple of minutes later, Detroit pushed the lead to 81-72. TVs throughout the greater Cleveland area started clicking to other channels.

Instead of folding, the Cavs rose to the challenge. They continued to move the ball on offense, they hit their free throws (quite a change from earlier in the night, actually), and they forced Detroit into several shaky shots. They took the lead, still held it into the final minute, then watched Detroit go up by two after a three-point play by Rip Hamilton (he drove into Anderson Varejao, who was called for the block; on the sidelines, Coach Mike Brown looked like he blew out a couple of O-rings). The Cavs again refused to be denied, as LeBron dribbled, dribbled, and dribbled until he saw the opening he liked (somehow, the Detroit defense parted like the Red Sea), and drove to the hoop for a tying, rim-rattling dunk with five seconds to go.

They continued the intensity through overtime, getting defensive stops (Detroit scored only four points in the extra session) and repeatedly forcing the Pistons into taking tough shots. They kept their cool, the Pistons eventually lost theirs, and the game was over.

He Wasn't Exactly Pinocchio Before, But He's A Real Boy Now: LeBron James had the game of his life. (*No, he didn't. He has yet to play the game of his life. But until that game comes along, last night's will have to do.*

) You can read the box score and see that his numbers were impressive enough -- 41 points, 17-of-31 shooting from the field, seven rebounds, eight assists, three steals. But none of those numbers were career highs; he's had a few games where his stats were even better.

However, LeBron was an absolute leader last night. I hate resorting to sportswriter hyperbole, but he willed the Cavs to victory. It came in the form of the many drives to the basket (including the previously mentioned dunk to tie the game with five seconds remaining in regulation). It came in the form of the commanding, head-and-shoulders-above-the-rest-of-you-commoners rebounds that he grabbed. It came in the form of the free throws that he swished (and he did,

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for the most part, showing that one of his recent weaknesses may be closing). It came in the form of the apparent buzzer-beater that he hit at the end of regulation (almost as if to respond to those critics who whine that he can't hit the big shot).

Maybe most importantly, it came in the form of defense. Three plays in particular stood out:

- With five minutes remaining and Cleveland trailing by three, Billups had the ball on the right baseline. LeBron came from the other side of the baseline and ripped the ball right out of Billups's hands for the steal. It was an absolute jungle play – one that just screamed, *I want this ball and this game more than you do, and there's nothing you can do to stop me.*

- Early in the extra session, Detroit's Rip Hamilton got the ball in the lane for what appeared to be a layup to give the Pistons the lead. *Wrong.* LeBron swatted Hamilton's shot away – one of those emasculating blocks that basically leaves the opposing player searching for his manhood.

- A couple of minutes later, with the Cavs holding the advantage, Detroit's Tayshaun Prince posted up LeBron. LBJ refused to give up any ground, and forced Prince towards the middle of the lane. Prince tried to spin the other way for a layup, but he was called for traveling.

The other point I want to mention: LeBron never, ever showed emotion. When he slammed the dunk to tie the game near the end of regulation, the Cavs on the bench were going crazy. During the resulting time out, the camera showed Drew Gooden laughing it up. Not LBJ. He stalked back to the bench with the look that said *we still have some work to do; there will be plenty of time later to joke around if we win this thing.*

Great to see it.

LeBron's mid-season slump may prevent him from getting the MVP award ... but nobody on the planet is playing better basketball right now. Nobody.

The Sweetest Sound...: ...is the sound of the visitors' arena after you've just hit a game-winning shot at the buzzer. And we had that at the end of regulation. With the score tied at 93 apiece, and one second remaining, LeBron got the ball some 30 feet from the basket, turned, and launched a bomb. *Swish.* The Cavs were going crazy. Coach Mike Brown sprinted to the locker room with a speed that would have placed him somewhere in the middle of the prospective draftees at the NFL scouting combine.

Just one little problem. While the play took one second, there was only 0.9 seconds on the clock. So LeBron's shot was just leaving his hand as the clock hit zero. But that hush (accompanied by the low-level buzz of *did that just happen?*) was beautiful.

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Maybe He Should Just Play The Final Five Minutes: Just as he did the other night against Houston, Zydrunas Ilgauskas made several huge plays in the waning minutes of regulation:

- With the Cavs trailing 84-81, Z stole the ball from Webber;
- On the ensuing play, he buried a jumper from the top of the key to cut the Detroit lead to one point;
- On Detroit's next possession, which resulted in a missed jumper by Webber, Z pulled down the big rebound;
- At the other end, he found LBJ with a nice pass for an easy basket and the lead;
- With just over a minute to go, and Cleveland still clinging to its one point lead, Z found himself about 20 feet from the hoop with the ball in his hands and approximately 0.0001 second remaining on the shot clock. He shot-putted a jumper towards the rim. *Swish.*

Hey, Look Who's Back!: After a month or so of games that he would just as soon forget, Gooden showed up to post 22 points (10-of-18 shooting from the field) and 10 rebounds. He searched far and wide for his missing jump shot, and he finally found it; several of his baskets were the 18-foot jumper variety. (He also threw down a couple of mammoth dunks, including a major throw-down with a little over five minutes remaining.) Gooden is maddeningly inconsistent, and he still holds the record for Man With The Least Amount Of Hair Who Needs A Haircut; but he was a big reason why I'm writing about a Cavs victory right now.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

There's a story about a woman and her young son at the beach. (The story usually has the woman being of a certain persuasion; I do not want to go there, and will not.) The boy is playing in the sand. Suddenly, a huge wave rolls in, and the undertow takes the little guy out to sea. The woman looks skyward and frantically prays to God. "Please oh please bring my little boy back!," she exclaims.

On cue, another huge wave rolls in, and deposits the boy on the sand, unharmed. The woman looks her son up and down for a moment. She then eyes the sky angrily, and growls, "he WAS wearing a hat!"

Sure, I could find things to pick on. The way the Cavs let an early 13-point lead go up in flames. The defense that allowed Billups to drive into the lane at will and then dish the ball to Detroit's big men (he finished with a game-high 14 assists). Cleveland's horrendous free throw shooting (13-of-24 total; no wonder the game was so close). Larry Hughes clanging his way to a 5 of 16 night from the field (and this after he made his first two shots).

Somehow, those criticisms make me feel like I'm complaining about the missing hat.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

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The Cavs, who improved their record to 36-25, get a couple of days of rest today and tomorrow, then have back-to-back games over the weekend against Milwaukee and Indiana. They are moving into a softer portion of the schedule and should be well-positioned to make a move.