

## Cavs/Bulls - The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}  
Saturday, March 31 2007 7:00 PM -

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What a freaking day of basketball yesterday!! The Cavs were a perfect appetizer to the Buckeyes Final Four win, knocking off the Bulls in overtime of an enormous game that gave them breathing room in the race for the two seed. After missing a couple chances to win it in regulation, the Cavs were down four late in OT. Then ... LeBron took over. John Hnat recaps yesterday's exhilarating win. Just three weeks 'till the playoffs!



### THE SUMMARY:

Cavs fans, we have reason to feel better this morning. In what was probably the most important game of the year to date, the Cavs prevailed in overtime, 112-108, against the Chicago Bulls. LeBron James, coming up big in yet another important game, led all scorers with 39 points (he also tallied nine assists, best on the Cavs). Sasha Pavlovic and Larry Hughes each scored 21. Chicago's Ben Gordon almost matched LeBron basket for basket, as he scored 37, and Tyrus Thomas added a career-high 27 points.

Chicago started the game with consecutive three-pointers from Kirk Hinrich and Gordon, and it looked like Cleveland was in for a long afternoon. They were able to stay close through the first quarter (the frame ended with the Bulls holding a 30-26 lead), then used a 29-12 run to take a 13 point lead with three minutes remaining in the second quarter. Chicago closed that gap to six points by halftime, then continued to shoot well in the second half, taking the lead shortly into the third quarter when a Hinrich three-pointer gave them a 65-63 lead.

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Instead of folding, Cleveland responded to that challenge. Behind a couple of baskets from both James and Pavlovic, the Cavs finished the third quarter on an 11-1 run, and led 83-73 with twelve (well, seventeen) minutes to go. Mainly because they did not score a single field goal after Larry Hughes hit a jumper with 5:36 remaining in the quarter, the Cavs blew that lead, and were fortunate to still be tied when regulation play ended. (Thanks to their offensive rebounding, Chicago had approximately ten times to win the game in the final minute, but could not get the basket they needed.)

Overtime looked bleak for Cavs Nation. Chicago took a 108-104 lead on two Ben Wallace free throws ( *yes, he made both of them*) with just a minute to go.

That's when LeBron decided that he did not want to sit with a depressed group of teammates on the flight out of town. On the Cavs' next possession, he drove towards the lane, then reversed his dribble, hit a short jumper, drew the foul from Hinrich, and made the free throw to cut the lead to 108-107. After Gordon missed a shot at the other end, LeBron grabbed the rebound, then hit a short jumper with 20 seconds remaining to give the Cavs a 109-108 lead.

The next possession was the key to the game. Anderson Varejao and Hughes both stepped out on Gordon, forcing him to throw a wild pass in the general direction of a teammate. Unfortunately for Mr. Gordon, the pass was in the more specific direction of Drew Gooden, who knocked the ball away. The ball ended up in Hughes' hands, forcing Chicago to foul him. Larry kept the game interesting by missing one of the free throws, and then Gordon kept the game even more interesting by launching a three-pointer with seconds to go. He missed; Hughes grabbed the rebound; he then made a pair of relatively meaningless free throws with 0.2 second remaining to seal the game.

The victory was vitally important to the Cavs because it extended their lead in the standings over Chicago to a game and a half (Cleveland is now 44-29 on the season; Chicago dropped to 43-31). That advantage is crucial because it means the difference between a favorable first-round playoff matchup against Orlando or New Jersey and a tougher series against Miami or Toronto. (It also means not having to face Detroit until the conference finals, should

they get that far.)

### WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

**If THAT Wasn't Clutch, Then What Is?:** LeBron has taken his fair share of criticism (actually, he's taken your share and my share as well) for not being a "clutch" player – for tightening up when the game is on the line. Critics point to his pair of missed three-pointers (which would have tied the game) in the final seconds at Dallas, or his missed three-pointer at the end of regulation against Charlotte a couple of weeks ago (a game the Cavs later lost in overtime), as some kind of proof that LeBron is not a "money player" or that he folds when the heat is its hottest.

Let's send those people a copy of the last minute of the game. With Cleveland down by four with one minute to go, LeBron scored the next five points, giving the Cavs a lead that they would never lose. Both of the shots that he hit were tough ones in the paint, with defenders all around him. And he also swished the free throw (which until recently had become a very sore spot in his game). A game-winning shot doesn't have to come with the buzzer sounding; clutch play in the last minute certainly is just as important.

**See, Larry, You Can Shoot 7 For 21 And Still Be Praised:** It was not Pavlovic's best game ever. He started off well enough – he scored 14 points in the first half, including seven straight during a flurry in the second quarter – but faded in the second half. He eventually fouled out in overtime. He finished with a less than stellar 7 of 21 performance from the field.

And yet he's here drawing praise. Why? Because he is emerging as the #2 guy behind LeBron. Sasha is becoming the guy who will take the critical shots when LeBron is double- or triple-teamed. He may not always make them – he did miss a tough layup at the end of regulation that would have given Cleveland the win – but he is now seeking out those opportunities.

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Sasha also deserves props for his defense. He was assigned to Chicago's Luol Deng (who dropped 32 points on the Cavs earlier this season), and held him to 12 points (seven below his season average) on 5-of-14 shooting.

**Or You Can Score All Of One Point And Be Praised:** Another guy who had a decent game, though the box score shows almost no evidence of it, is Drew Gooden. Granted, he was part of the matador box-out rotation that allowed Chicago's Thomas several offensive boards; and he scored all of one point the entire game. He's here because of his 14 rebounds, his blocked shot on Hinrich with a minute to go in regulation (Hinrich tried to put up one of those floaters as he drove the lane; Gooden was able to get his fingertips on the ball), and his steal with time running out in overtime. (Yesterday also marked his 73<sup>rd</sup>

consecutive game with a Chia pet glued to the back of his head; it's believed to be a new NBA record. He has even driven Scot Pollard to grow his hair normally, as Pollard appears resigned that no amount of follicle creativity will match Gooden's.)

**What Are The Bear, The Woods, And The Laxative Doing Here?:** For the third time this week, the Cavs' free throw shooting has landed them in the "What I Liked" section. They were 25 of 32 from the line (or 78%) for the game, which shows that (a) they went to the free throw line often, and (b) once there, they actually did what they were there to do. LeBron led the way ( *no, his agent did not pay me to write this column* ) by making all but two of his 13 free throws, and Larry Hughes made eight of ten himself. (Although Larry did miss one with nine seconds left in overtime, and the Cavs clinging to a one-point lead, that had me uttering an unusual amount of Fs.)

**The War Was Over. He Loved Fox Sports Ohio.:** I've hammered on the Fox Sports Ohio announcers plenty of times this season. Yet I still chose the FSO broadcast over ESPN's national broadcast. Why? Well, the real reason was that FSO's high definition signal was clear as a moonlit sky on a cold night, while ESPN is still apparently using soup cans and string to transmit their HD feed.

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But I have to thank ESPN for that, because then I would have missed some absolute gems from the FSO announcers (and then you wouldn't be reading about them):

- (Fred McLeod, on Thomas:) *"He's not comfortable handling the ball, as a ball handler."*  
(Are there non-ball handling ways to handle ... better not complete this sentence, as it is sounding awfully XXX-rated.);

- (Austin Carr, as a Cav missed a free throw:) *"You need to make free throws when you want to extend leads or knock leads down."*  
(Yeah, Austin, that pretty much covers it all.);

- (A.C., with the Cavs having the ball, three seconds remaining on the shot clock, 1:07 left in overtime, and losing by two points:) *"I'm going to go out on a limb here. If the Cavs score here, they have a good chance to win the ballgame."*  
(For the record, LBJ missed a three-pointer, yet the Cavs eventually won.)

I can't compete with analyses like those. (To be fair, McLeod had a terrific remark when he commented that A.C. wears wine-and-gold colored glasses.)

### WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

**I Know He Was A High Draft Pick And All, But ... Who The Hell Was That Guy?:** As mentioned earlier, Thomas scored a career-high 27 points for Chicago. He made nine of his 11 shots from the field (most of those on dunks). He also made nine of ten free throws, continuing a recent trend of Guys Who Shoot Like Rick Barry Against The Cavs, And Like Dennis Rodman Against The Rest Of The Association. The only time it is permissible to let an opponent pop off for a career high is when it is

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. (And/or when it allows me the opening for gratuitous links to my other columns. We're up to three this morning.)

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**Better Run Those Drills Again, Coach:** After losing four of the previous six games, often with the opponents having a high shooting percentage, Coach Mike Brown was quoted as saying that the Cavs need to get back to their defensive roots, and that it was going to be a focus of the practices leading into the Chicago game. Looks like they need some more work, as Chicago shot 51% from the field.

**You Picked A Fine Time To Leave Us, Lucille:** We've discussed the Cavs' tendency to have extended dry spells on offense, and sure enough, they had one yesterday. And this one came at the worst possible time. Cleveland managed just four points, all of them on free throws, in the final 5:36 of regulation. They attempted only six shots during that time; four of those were three pointers. That fact alone tells you whether the Cavs were moving the ball inside, or whether they were standing around the perimeter and bombing away.

**Don't Just Foul Him. FOUL Him:** Idea for Coach Brown (maybe one he has already implemented behind the scenes): if a player has the chance to foul an opponent and send him to the line, and instead draws a weak foul while allowing said opponent to score and then have a three-point play opportunity, fine his ass a kajillion dollars. With that in mind, Zydrunas Ilgauskas would be a kajillion dollars lighter today. Given the chance to put a hard foul on Thomas, he instead brushed some lint off Thomas's forearm. The contact had absolutely no chance of preventing Thomas from dunking the ball, but it gave the refs reason to call the foul and allow the three-point play. I know it is much easier to say this sitting on my couch in suburban Cleveland, but FOUL him. Make him earn those points, big guy.

### WHAT LIES AHEAD:

Cleveland continues its road trip in Boston against the Celtics tonight at 6:00 PM. And yes, tonight it will be a 6:00 PM start. None of this 6:21 or 6:14 garbage. I say that because in response to my previous columns (specifically [this one](#) and [this one](#)), my wife has reset the alarm clock in our bedroom to show the proper time. Boy, did that throw me off the other day. I woke up at "6:30", figuring that it was really 6:15-ish, and that I had plenty of time to get ready for work. About two minutes later, I looked at my watch, which said

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6:32

. Damn, I was NOT prepared for that one. I am glad that our clock is now being used for its intended purpose, but it wasn't a perfectly smooth adjustment.