

Hughes Disappointment

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Back in mid-February, just as the NBA All Star break was approaching, we [noted](#) that the Cavs were on pace to win 48 games. With just six games left, the Cavs need to go 2-3 to make that happen. In other words, the Cavs haven't put on the late season surge that many expected. As a result, they likely could end up slightly worse than last season when they won 50 games. At best, they'll end up the same.

This is troubling for any number of reasons. First, it contrasts sharply with last season. As most will recall, following last year's All Star break the Cavs were a very streaky team that ultimately became a good team. They had a five-game losing streak and another three-game losing streak. But they also had a four-game winning streak and an impressive late-season nine-game winning streak, something they haven't achieved this year. Moreover, they were 19-10 after the break last year, but when they needed it most at the end of the season, they were an amazing 14-3 in their last 17 games and were clearly headed in the right direction come playoff time.

This season, they are 15-9 since the All Star break and need to go 4-1 in their last five games just to equal both last year's post-break total and last year's season win total. In their last 12 games, though, with the season on the line, they are only 6-6. In other words, they could match last season's win total, but that would be deceiving. With just a handful of games

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remaining, even if they win them all the Cavs enter the playoffs on much different footing than a year ago.

Another reason all this is troubling is that it is an almost total repudiation of GM Danny Ferry's off-season strategy to stay the course. The thinking was that a healthy Larry Hughes and another year of seasoning for a young team coming together were bound to result in more wins. Hardly. While many want to point to LeBron James' numbers being slightly down from a year ago as the culprit, the real problem has been the poor play of Larry Hughes, a high-priced free agent from Washington who just hasn't panned out.

While Thursday night's loss to the Heat was a team effort, the final play in overtime told the story. Needing a three-point shot, head coach Mike Brown had Hughes throwing in the ball from the sideline. As expected, the Heat was playing tight defense and Hughes had trouble finding an open man. With the five-second clock in his head ticking down, Hughes panicked and threw an ill-advised pass completely across court that was easily intercepted. Game over.

In Brian Windhorst's game [story](#) in the Akron Beacon Journal following the Miami game, he rightly noted that James once again had the ball in his hands at the end of the game and couldn't convert. He also rightly noted that it's hard to pin the blame on James considering his 35 points and 9 rebounds as well as his 9 clutch free throws in the fourth quarter that helped key the comeback in the first place.

Strangely, though, Windhort never mentioned the terrible inbounds pass by Hughes or the fact that, once again, Hughes was generally a non-factor. While James is clearly the engine that drives this train, Hughes is a key piston who has been misfiring all season.

For example, Hughes is only shooting 39% from the floor this year, down from his career average of 41%, which itself isn't all that impressive. James gets criticized repeatedly for shot selection but he looks positively Larry Bird-like in comparison to the junk that Hughes consistently attempts. Hughes' three-point shooting percentage is 33% this year, up from a career average of 29% but for his career he averages about 2 three-point attempts per game so this statistic is relatively meaningless. But where Hughes is really hurting the team is at the free-throw line. Much has been made about James' troubles, but it is Hughes who is hurting the team more. Hughes is hitting only 68% of his free throws, down from his career average of 75%. Contrast that with James who is hitting 70% this year versus a career average of 73%. Moreover, since March 1, James has raised his average, hitting 76% from the free throw line while Hughes is hitting only 69%, essentially the same as he has been doing all year. James has clearly turned up his game a notch and Hughes continues to founder.

Certainly the Cavs problems this year shouldn't all be pinned on Hughes, but it should be remembered that in a way he, more so than James, was counted on to help get this team over the hump. James has played at a consistently high level for all four years of his career. Although there is still room for improvement in his game, it isn't that great. For the golfers out there, it's like trying to go from a 1 handicap to scratch.

Hughes, on the other hand, is like the 8-handicapper that everyone thought would become a

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scratch golfer. Instead he's turned into a 14-handicapper at a time when the Cavs need him most. Instead of validating a stay the course strategy, Hughes play has highlighted a gaping hole that needs to be filled if this team is ever going to contend for a NBA championship. This is perhaps is really why his play is most troubling. Hughes has thus far demonstrated that that any faith in his ability has been misplaced, which more than anything, spells trouble heading into an off-season where the Cavs have no draft picks and precious little cap room.