

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

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}
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Well, opportunity knocked for the Cavaliers last night, and they failed to answer the door. Despite getting next to no production from LeBron James, and also despite the fact that Rip Hamilton and Rasheed Wallace ate us alive ... the Cavs had a real chance to steal game one in Motown, falling 79-76 to the Pistons. John Hnat's game recaps have been incredible all season and this one is no different.



THE SUMMARY:

I am now officially bald. I'm sure you are too, if you watched the game last night. Watching the Cavs lose to the Pistons 79-76, in a very winnable game, was enough to leave any Cleveland fan with large clumps of hair missing this morning.

Cleveland started the game well enough – they never trailed in the first half, led by as many as nine points, and took a 41-35 lead into the locker room at the break. Amazingly, they did this without much scoring help from LeBron James, who had scored only four points at that juncture. LBJ was content to set up his teammates – at the half, Larry Hughes had nine points, Zydrunas Ilgauskas eight, Anderson Varejao seven, and Drew Gooden six. (When was the last time James was fifth on the team in scoring at the half?)

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The Pistons erased that lead quickly in the third quarter, rattling off the first seven points to take their first lead of the game. To the Cavs' credit, they rose to the challenge. The game somehow became even closer in the second half, with 11 lead changes and two ties during those 24 minutes.

As he has done so often before, Detroit's Chauncey Billups produced the biggest basket of the game, burying a three-pointer with 1:52 remaining to give the Pistons a 78-76 advantage. The two teams then traded non-scoring possessions. James missed a jumper; Hamilton clanked one off the backboard; Hughes channeled [Al Oerter](#) on a layup attempt; and Billups had the ball stolen by Hughes. That steal gave the Cavs the ball with 36 seconds left.

As observant Cavs fans know, that means that the Cavs really had the ball with 16 seconds left, as James would dribble, dribble, dribble the seconds away before going to work in the shot clock's final moments. He found Ilgauskas open; alas, big Z missed the jumper. Not so alas, Hughes hustled for the rebound, giving the Cavs one last gasp with 12 seconds to go.

On the game's most critical play, James drove the ball down the left side of the lane. He seemed to have a path to the hoop, although Rasheed Wallace (who had already blocked seven shots in the game) came over to help. Wallace's rotation left Donyell Marshall wide open in the right corner; James found him with a pass. Marshall showed his immense powers, getting untold numbers of Cavs fans to swear at their TVs as he missed the three-point attempt that would have given Cleveland the lead. Detroit rebounded the ball, and the game was

over. (The Cavs did end up with one last-ditch attempt to tie the game, but when your last gasp consists of Andy Varejao heaving a rock from the opposite free throw line, the game is indeed over.)

Ilgaukas paced the Cavs with 22 points and 13 rebounds. Hughes and Varejao each scored 13, and LeBron just missed a triple-double by one assist (10 points, 10 rebounds, nine helpers). (When was the last time James was fourth on the team in scoring?) Hamilton, the Pistons' human track meet, ran his way to a game-high 24 points, and Rasheed Wallace posted 15 points and 12 boards.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

If It Looks Like A Duck, And It Quacks Like A Duck.... ...it may be a decoy. And that's exactly what LeBron was last night. Detroit's defense had three priorities last night:

1. Stop LeBron from driving to the hoop;
2. Stop LeBron from driving to the hoop;
3. Stop LeBron from driving to the hoop.

They did stop LeBron from driving to the hoop, but LeBron kept finding open teammates with passes. He would threaten to drive to the hoop; two or three (or four) Detroit defenders would form a wall between him and the hoop; and he would then find an open teammate and get him the ball. Other than a couple of times when he clearly got frustrated and jacked up ill-advised shots, he stuck to the plan of putting his fellow Cavs in the position to make baskets. (Whether those teammates knew what to do with those passes is another story; we'll get to that.)

Rasheed Wallace Is Ready To Smack Him With Another Elbow: Ilgauskas had a tremendous game with his 22 points and 13 rebounds, seven of those on the offensive end (with four or five of those coming on one play in the first quarter, a miss-and-rebound-your-own-shot drill that would have fit nicely in Moses Malone's career). Other than his miss in the final minute, he was automatic on the eighteen-foot jumpers that define his game, and his Lurch-evoking low-post moves were resulting in baskets as well. Last year at this time, Z was spending much of his time on the bench because of ineffectiveness; this year, he has been an important postseason contributor.

You Know The TNT Executives Hate It, But...: ...the

Cleveland-Detroit series will be about defense. And Cleveland held up their end of the bargain yesterday, holding Detroit to 79 points and 43% shooting from the field. They hounded Billups, causing him to turn the ball over more often (seven times) than he shot it (six). They hassled Tayshaun Prince into a 1-for-11 night. They frustrated Chris Webber, holding him to a pedestrian 10 points. They forced Detroit into 16 turnovers overall, and beat the Pistons 49-41 on the boards.

Resiliency: Cavs fans could be excused for thinking that the game was effectively over after Billups drained a three-pointer to make the score 71-68 halfway through the fourth quarter. (The basket came after the Cavs forced Detroit into a desperation shot by Hamilton with one second left on the shot clock; while he missed the shot, Detroit's Jason Maxiell grabbed the offensive rebound, leading to the Billups bomb.) The shot was exactly the kind of back-breaker that could put a team into the fetal position. Instead, the Cavs scored the next two baskets (both by Ilgauskas) to regain the lead. It is a tiny but important sign of a team that has confidence and will not panic when their opponent makes a run.

Hey, Where Has That Guy Been?: At least In the first half, Hughes drove the ball into the lane quite often. When Larry does this, Good Things tend to happen. He may take the ball

all the way to the hole. He may get fouled taking the ball all the way to the hole. Or he may pull up in the lane and hit a short jumper, which seems to be the most reliable shot in his arsenal.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

It's The Regular Season All Over Again: During the regular season, the Cavs were second to last in the league in free throw shooting. Only the Miami Heat were worse as a team ... and they have Shaquille O'Neal. In this particular competition, that is like playing Tic-Tac-Toe and spotting your opponent the first three plays. However, the Cavs had risen up (sure, I'll tie in to the team's marketing ploys wherever possible) to shoot a respectable 75% from the line during the first two playoff series.

Apparently, the Pistons' defense extends to the free throw line as well, because Les Cavs were back to their old selves last night. For the game, they shot 11 of 17 (64.7%) from the line. Had they shot 75% from the line ... they would have lost by one. So maybe it would not have made a difference. But

watching the Cavs leave points on the table (especially early – they were 6 of 12 from the line in the first quarter, which probably triggers an incentive clause in Ben Wallace’s contract, but is pretty miserable everywhere else in the universe) in such a close game was utterly painful.

They Did Fix The Problem, Literally: So how did Cleveland stop their free throw shooting woes? By not attempting any more free throws! After having 12 attempts in the first quarter, the Cavs attempted only five –

five

– more freebies the rest of the game. Why? Because they stopped driving to the hoop, and started passing the ball around the perimeter. Certainly, the Pistons’ defense contributed: Detroit sagged on virtually every Cavalier drive to the hole, daring the Cavs to beat them with outside shooting. (Not a bad strategy, all things considered.)

Maybe They Shouldn’t Have Taken ANY Shots: The free throw line was not the only place where the Cavs had trouble getting shots to fall. They shot 37.2% from the floor for the game, a number that seems generous. Detroit gets some of the credit for playing tough defense and forcing Cleveland (and James in particular) into tough shots; but the Cavs were an accessory to the crime, missing open jumper after open

jumper. Hughes, Pavlovic, Marshall, Daniel Gibson ... none of them had their shot working last night.

Maybe HE Shouldn't Have Taken ANY Shots: Pavlovic had a very difficult game, between his 4-of-14 shooting from the field, his 0-of-2 shooting from the line, his goose eggs in every other significant statistical category, and his lack of defense on Hamilton (though to be fair, Sasha is hardly the first player to have been left in the dust by the peripatetic masked man). He blew a layup (though Eric Snow still has the hammerlock on that category, having missed no fewer than three layups last night), missed a couple of wide-open three pointers, and just did not look comfortable in any way. (Sasha was able to get steam to shoot out of Coach Mike Brown's ears. On the previously mentioned three-pointer by Billups that gave Detroit a 71-68 lead, Pavlovic did not step out to contest it.)

A younger player like Pavlovic can be expected to have his ups and downs. At this stage of the season, it would be nice to see just a little more up.

While We're Talking About Sasha: For the eleventy-jillionth time this season, Sasha' infamous "my offense is my defense"

quote was repeated, this time by the TNT announcers (who otherwise did a very good job with the game; not too surprising, as Marv Albert and Steve Kerr did the duties). I call for the basketball world to never repeat this quotation again. The horse has been killed, cremated, and had its ashes spread over a wide area.

The Inevitable Fallout: The Cavs' last possession of the game, in which LeBron passed to a wide-open Marshall instead of shooting the ball himself, will undoubtedly come under scrutiny from Cavs Nation. "LeBron should have taken the ball to the hoop!," many will say. Bottom line: Donyell had a wide-open look at a three-pointer that would have won the game (maybe that's getting ahead of ourselves; it would have given Cleveland a lead with but a few ticks left on the clock), but didn't make it. He makes that shot, and all of Cleveland is praising LeBron's passing ability this morning. The results do not always determine the wisdom of the action that produced them.

DEPARTMENT OF THINGS I NEVER NOTICED BEFORE:

Because Fans Can't Do Math In Cyberspace Either: You know "The Diff," the annoying little feature on the Quicken Loans Arena scoreboard that shows the difference between the two teams' scores? The

[Cavs's web site](#)

now has "The Diff" as well. Riddle me this, somebody in the Cavs' organization:

what is so flipping difficult about subtracting one number from another?

(Then again, I thought "eleventy-jillion" was a number a few paragraphs ago, so maybe the folks at The Q know something.)

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs and Pistons will play Game Two of their series on Thursday night (it would have been Wednesday, but the NBA did not want to go head-to-head with *American Idol*; perhaps David Stern is a Jordin fan). The series then comes to Cleveland for games on Sunday and Tuesday.