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In short, the Cavs are not paying Hughes more than \$13 million this year to miss wide-open seven-footers with the game on the line. Had Hughes made the shot, Cleveland would have been up by one, inside of 15 seconds.

Hughes' miss, combined with Rasheed Wallace's make of a teardrop jumper from the baseline on the preceding possession, underscored the current difference between Detroit and Cleveland in the clutch.

For the second straight game, Detroit didn't play particularly well, but for the second straight game, Cleveland couldn't make up the difference.

Up by 12 at the half, the Cavs predictably let the Pistons back into the game in the third quarter. Unlike Game 1, however, the Cavs didn't let Detroit take the lead and dictate the remainder of the game.

The game see-sawed throughout the fourth quarter with the Cavs and Pistons both leading by as much as five. But Cleveland once again made critical blunders, including five straight turnovers midway through the quarter, and a crucial botched

possession leading 77-76 in which they treated the ball like a hot potato. LeBron had the ball inside with the shot clock winding down, then rifled a pass outside to Sasha Pavlovic, who looked like he was going to hoist a three, then changed his mind mid-air when the Pistons applied defensive pressure. The result: another turnover.

The Pistons kept leaving the door open until Hughes missed his jumper, Anderson Varejao missed a putback, the Pistons secured the ball and the whole thing reeked of Game 6 in last year's Cavs-Pistons series.

Mike Brown was livid after the possession, drawing a technical foul. He apparently thought LeBron was fouled on the shot attempt that led to Hughes' miss. By the time the final buzzer sounded, Brown was worked into a full-on lather, and it appeared that as he left the court, he broke stride to confront a heckler. Cavs GM Danny Ferry intervened before anything happened and escorted Brown into the tunnel.

Such is life for a coach who was an assistant with the Pacers in his prior job and has probably been on the losing end against the Pistons one too many times.

Despite the frustrating nature of both losses, the Cavs leave Detroit with the knowledge that the gap between them and the Pistons isn't all that wide overall. But the gap widens considerably when the fourth quarter clock ticks inside five minutes.

When the game is on the line, the Pistons have done enough to win. The Cavs have done enough to lose. It's that simple.

The Cavs have had opportunities to pull both games out despite the fact that LeBron is having a brutal series by his standards. LeBron's 19 points led all scorers in Game 2, and he did block six shots, but he had zero points in the third quarter as the Pistons erased their halftime deficit, and the rim wasn't friendly to him in the final minutes, as he missed a pair of would-have-been clutch shots.

LeBron isn't finishing at the rim the way we all know he can. The Pistons defense has taken him out of his rhythm and has made him think about missing shots and getting shots blocked down low. It was Detroit's game plan heading into this series, and so far, it's done enough to give them a 2-0 edge.

They are now halfway to their third NBA Finals berth in four years.

Cleveland has one last stand it can take: The next two games will be the first Eastern Conference finals games in Northeast Ohio since 1992. The Q will undoubtedly be rocking, in stark contrast to the seemingly jaded, "Wake me when we get to the Finals" Detroit crowds.

Cleveland absolutely, positively must win Games 3 and 4 in order to have a chance in this series. If the Pistons take even one of the next two in Cleveland, the Cavs' last toehold might be removed, and it will be time for Ferry to start thinking about the offseason moves he needs to make to get his team past the Detroit blockade next spring.

Up next: Game 3, Sunday, 8:30 p.m. at Quicken Loans Arena