

What A Ride

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
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As we get ready for tonight's monumental game four clash between the Cavs and the Celtics, it's time to take a quick look back at last year's magical playoff run for the wine a gold, a run that ended with the franchise's first ever appearance in the NBA Finals. In Jesse's latest, he recalls the signature games, plays, and moments of that run ... starting with the chain reaction on the last night of the regular season, and ending with Boobie Gibson's barrage of three balls to advance the Cavs to the Finals.



For 53 days last spring, the Cavaliers played the longest and most memorable postseason in franchise history - the first to stretch into the month of June, and the first to end in the NBA Finals. It's time, for one last time, to recall the signature games, plays, and moments of Cleveland's roll to the first conference championship in franchise history. Here are eight of them, starting with the chain reaction of the regular season's last night on April 18, segueing into the lackluster first-round series against the injury-ravaged Bullets (I prefer the old name), continuing through the second-round series against the Nets, and ending with Game Six of the dramatic Eastern Conference Finals against the Pistons on June 2.

I'd love to extend the tribute to the Finals but, well, this site isn't called TheSanAntonioFan.com.

The Perfect Storm- Game 82

Going into the final day of the regular season on April 18, the Cavaliers were

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slotted fifth in the Eastern Conference playoff race. Their 49-32 record was tied with Chicago's for the second-best in the East, but the Bulls owned the tiebreaker, thanks to their superior record within the conference. If Cleveland was to get the second seed, they would need a victory for themselves over the Bucks that night, combined with a Chicago loss in New Jersey. Otherwise, they would be forced to battle through the Heat and the Pistons just to get to the Eastern Conference Finals, where they hadn't been since 1992.

That wasn't all. Everyone's desired playoff opponent Washington, crippled by injuries to Gilbert Arenas and Caron Butler, stood at 40-41, tied with the Nets and a game ahead of Orlando for the seventh playoff spot. The Nets held the tiebreaker over the Bullets, due to their 3-0 head-to-head record against them. In order to meet the denuded Bullets, the Cavaliers, in addition to the aforementioned win for themselves and loss for Chicago, needed Washington to win at Indiana and stay ahead of the much healthier Magic, themselves almost guaranteed of a win over a Heat team that had the Southeast Division clinched and would be resting its starters.

The Cavaliers did their part. They led the vacation-bound Bucks the entire 48 minutes and cruised to a 109-96 win, despite 28 points from little Earl Boykins, playing in front of the home folks. Cleveland still needed the Bulls to lose in the swamps of Jersey, and on that count, Chicago was more than obliging. Playing tight, Scott Skiles's team shot 42%, committed 16 turnovers, and fell behind by 15 in the first quarter against the inspired Nets. They would draw to within one at the end of the third quarter, but that was as close as they got; led by the shooting of Bostjan Nachbar, New Jersey scored 35 fourth-quarter points and defeated the Bulls 106-97, bumping the Cavaliers to the second seed.

The Bullets provided the final link in the chain by beating the Pacers to move into the seventh spot opposite the Cavaliers. With 25 seconds to play and his team trailing by two, Indiana's Ike Diogu, an 80% free-throw shooter, stepped to the line with a chance to tie the game. He missed them both. It was just Cleveland's night.

The events of April 18 had given the Cavaliers the easiest road to the conference finals- by far- of any team in the NBA. They would take advantage of the turn of good fortune.

Drew is Gooden- Game Two vs. Washington

Drew Gooden is, to put it nicely, a cipher. He is slow on his defensive rotations, vanishes into thin air for games at a time, and although he doesn't come off as dumb in his interviews, he's obviously sort of a male fluff chick. At the same time, he's athletically gifted enough to take over a game. And in the second quarter of Game Two against the Bullets, he did just that.

Up 1-0 in a series they were expected to sweep, the Cavaliers came out flat for Game Two and trailed 37-32 midway through the second quarter. The team and the Quicken Loans Arena crowd were listless and in need of a spark. Gooden stepped in to provide it. In the last six minutes of the half, he went six-for-six from the field- all on jump shots- scored 14 points, and grabbed four rebounds. The formerly nomadic lottery pick punctuated his hot streak with triumphant howls, demands for the ball, and his not-a-little-bit dorky fluttering-finger gesture signifying that they, and he, are *en fuego*.

Energized by Gooden's emotionally charged play, the Cavaliers surged to a 51-48 halftime lead and never trailed again, holding on to win 109-102. They then went to Washington and completed the first-round sweep, the first winning whitewash in team playoff history.

Sasha Says No- Game One vs. New Jersey

Trailing a veteran New Jersey team early in the fourth quarter of the series opener, the Cavaliers put together a run and took the lead, but were unable to put a comfortable space between them and the Nets. Cleveland was clinging to a tenuous 77-73 lead with under two minutes left, but when Jason Kidd got a steal and found himself all alone going to the other hand, it looked as if it would soon be a two-point game, with plenty of time remaining.

Enter Sasha Pavlovic. Never giving up on the play, he chased down the cruising Kidd and swatted his lay-up attempt into the photographer's section. The rejection provided a surge of momentum to the Cavaliers and the crowd, and the Nets couldn't recover. 17 seconds later, Pavlovic stole the ball from Richard Jefferson, rendering New Jersey's possession point-less. Cleveland went on to win 81-77, taking a series lead they would never relinquish.

The Shooters- Game Six vs. New Jersey

Even by the standards of the Cavaliers, the third quarter of the elimination game at the Meadowlands was excruciating. With LeBron James on the bench in foul trouble, the Nets went on a 14-2 run to cut Cleveland's 13-point lead down to one at the end of the period. The Cavaliers scored a total of eight points in the third quarter, shot 4-of-18, and at one point missed ten consecutive shots. LBJ would be re-entering the game to start the fourth, but the Cavaliers still had to find some offense, stat, or the series would be going back to Cleveland for a Game Seven, with the pressure squarely on the Wine-and-Gold and what was sure to be an anxious crowd at the Q.

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Mike Brown, finally obtaining by accident a clue offensively, elected to spread the floor. He benched the ineffective Larry Hughes and the offensively-challenged Eric Snow and inserted into the game a small lineup of James, Daniel Gibson, Anderson Varejao, Donyell Marshall, and Damon Jones, who hadn't played extended minutes in several months.

With 8:40 left to play and the Cavaliers leading 64-63, the small lineup exploded. Gibson knocked in a three-pointer to extend the lead to 67-63. A minute later, Marshall bottomed out a three from his increasingly dusty corner office to make it 70-63. The snowball was rolling. Donyell canned three from downtown in the fourth quarter, half of his game total of six. Gibson hit two, and LeBron bombed in a long one himself. Cleveland hit six three-pointers in the final period, held New Jersey to 2-of-16 from the field, and pulled away to win comfortably, 88-72. The ticket had been punched for the Cavaliers' first trip to the Eastern Conference Finals since 1992.

The Facial- Game Three vs. Detroit

Midway through the fourth quarter of Game Three, the Cavaliers and Pistons were tied 68-68, and Cleveland, down 2-0 in the series, needed a win to maintain a pulse. With 7:31 left, LeBron James clanked a three-point attempt. Zydrunas Ilgauskas ran down the loose ball and fed it back to LBJ, who was standing by his lonesome beyond the three-point line. Instead of firing up another jumper, he waited, spied an opening in Detroit's defense, and put the ball on the floor. Rasheed Wallace met him at the basket, and LeBron crammed it home in his face, drawing a foul and setting off an explosion among the fans at the Q. Although he missed the ensuing free throw, LBJ had hammered home the dye-with a vengeance. Cleveland never gave up its lead and, paced by James's 32 points, nine boards, and nine assists, came home with an 88-82 victory to get back into the series for good.

The Free Throws- Game Four vs. Detroit

Just 4.5 seconds remained in Game Four. LeBron's eleven fourth-quarter points had helped put his team into the lead, 89-87, but one gigantic gut-check remained. Dogged by loud whispers about his foul shooting and his clutch ability all season, LBJ now would have to hit two pressure free throws to put the game away. One miss and the Pistons would have an opportunity to tie it with a three-pointer.

It was a one-on-one battle between the hype and the backlash.

As LeBron set up, Richard Hamilton ambled over and tried to talk him out of his concentration, the way LeBron had voodoo'd Gilbert Arenas into missing a pair of crucial free throws in the playoffs the year before. Agent Zero's mistake was to stand there and listen to LeBron's sweet nothings. LBJ was not inclined to lend the same privilege to the Ripster. He planted a forearm in Hamilton's skinny body, sending the masked Pistons swingman stumbling backward. Then he calmly stepped to the line and swished the first, and the second, free throws. The Cavaliers led by four. Seconds later, LeBron rebounded Detroit's last desperate shot and fired it into the frenzied air of the Q. The series was tied, and the Chosen One had destroyed another of the haters' canards.

Game Five

It's no overstatement to call this the greatest game, and the greatest individual performance, in the history of the franchise. Prior to the evening of May 31, the Cavaliers had never won more than two games in a conference final. In fact, they

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had never led a conference final series at any point. In one otherworldly night, LeBron James took the franchise to a place it had never been.

The memories of that night come in a series of images. LBJ leaping to the defense of the clothes lined Anderson Varejao in the first quarter. James on the bench early in the fourth quarter, visibly straining at the bit to get back in the game. 88-81 and one last run to make. LBJ's thunderous dunk over a cringing Tayshaun Prince to take the lead. Chauncey Billups's three-point bomb to send Detroit up 93-91. LBJ's dunk to tie it. Billups's last-second shot game-winning attempt barely rimming out. LeBron pumping in a twisting shot from the wing with three Pistons on him, giving the Cavaliers a 100-96 lead with thirty seconds left in the first overtime. Mike Brown's terrible game management seemingly throwing away Cleveland's best chance to win. LeBron's circus shots in the second overtime. His acrobatic lay-up to win. 29 of the last 30. And at the end of it all, the stunned expressions on the faces of the Witnesses in the Palace when it was all over and they had somehow lost.

It was the most harrowing, exhausting, exhilarating experience of my life as a Cleveland Cavaliers fan.

Five Shots to the Dome- Daniel Gibson, Game Six vs. Detroit

Before the night of June 2, Dan Gibson was a promising rookie guard with a sweet downtown stroke, a goofy nickname, and the body language of a baby-faced assassin. In the span of five shots late in Game Six against the Pistons, he became a legend.

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The Cavaliers had gotten off to a flying start in their attempt to eliminate Detroit and make their first trip to the Finals, ending the first quarter with a 12-2 run, but the scoreboard malfunction prior to the second period dissipated the team's momentum and cooled the ardor of the raucous, championship-famished crowd at the Q. The Cavs went cold, and the game became a grim struggle. Detroit led 63-62 with three minutes left in the third. Then Boobie Gibson took five shots:

- With 2:28 left in the third, he knocked in a three-pointer from the corner, giving the Cavaliers a 65-63 lead. As it turned out, they would not trail again.
- He drilled another three-pointer from the corner to start the fourth quarter, extending Cleveland's one-point lead to 70-66
- With 10:45 left, he bottomed out a three from the right wing, making the score 73-67.
- With 9:42 left, Gibson took a feed from LeBron James and drilled another three, this one from the left wing, making it 76-67.
- And the *coup de grace*: with 6:52 to play, Gibson dropped in a three-pointer out of the left corner, making it 86-71 Cleveland. Ballgame.
-

Gibson went five-for-five from downtown in Game Six; all of them coming in a roughly seven-minute span that saw Cleveland take the lead and turn the game into a runaway. He scored 19 of his 31 points (on nine shots) in the fourth quarter. On the greatest night in Cleveland sports since December 27, 1964, Boobie was the toast of the euphoric town.

Reality in the form of the mighty Spurs quickly intruded on Cleveland's dream season. Having reached the first Finals in franchise history, the Cavaliers are still looking for their first Finals win. But with distance comes perspective, and if the franchise puts as much distance between itself and the San Antonio whitewash as

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possible- as in, getting back to the Finals and winning a game, plus three more- we'll be able to remember 2007 more for the journey than for the destination.