

## Cavs/Suns: The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

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Want a study in contrasts? Look no further than the two professional Cleveland sports teams that played on Sunday. The Browns, trailing by 15 points in a game that they probably should have lost, rallied and eventually won their game in overtime. The Cavs, ahead by 12 points against one of the NBA's elite teams, stumbled their way to a 103-92 loss against Phoenix at the US Airways Center. John Hnat pipes in with the good, the bad, and the summary of last night's loss to the Suns.



### THE SUMMARY:

Want a study in contrasts? Look no further than the two professional Cleveland sports teams that played on Sunday.

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The Cavs, ahead by 12 points against one of the NBA's elite teams, stumbled their way to a 103-92 loss against Phoenix at the US Airways

Center.

*(No, that is not a misprint. The Browns are actually being used as the example of what is RIGHT with Cleveland sports. )*

I do not want to discuss the game until I absolutely have to, so let's talk about the US Airways Center for a moment. Have you ever been more likely to buy a company's products after watching a sporting event at a stadium/arena that they sponsor? If you are going to schedule a trip to, say, Des Moines this morning, will last night's game at the US Airways Center affect your thinking at all? Have you ever gone to a game at Quicken Loans Arena, and thought to yourself, "man, I really could use one of their adjustable-rate mortgages"? I know; advertising is all about putting your name out there as many times as possible; I get that. I'm just saying that when it's Sunday night and I have a leaking pipe, I don't know that watching games from the Roto-Rooter Fan Fest Section is going to influence my decision of who to call.

Okay, I'm out of distractions. Let's get to the game. The first half (and the first quarter in particular) was one of the uglier displays of basketball we've seen in a while. Just look at the list of plays from the first few minutes:

*Raja Bell: Missed jump shot*  
*Zydrunas Ilgauskas: Made jump shot*  
*Grant Hill: Missed jump shot*  
*Ilgauskas: Missed jump shot*

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*Bell: Missed jump shot*  
*Steve Nash: Missed jump shot*  
*LeBron James: Missed jump shot*  
*Ilgauskas: Missed put-back*  
*Larry Hughes: Missed three-point shot*  
*Shawn Marion: Missed three-point shot*  
*James: Turnover, bad pass*  
*Boris Diaw: Made layup*  
*Hughes: Missed jump shot*  
*Bell: Missed layup (blocked by James)*  
*Hughes: Turnover, bad pass*  
*Diaw: Missed jump shot*

You get the idea. The Cavs regrouped to put together a string of makes later in the quarter, and finished the frame with a respectable 10-of-23 mark from the field and a 22-21 lead.

In the second quarter, the Cavs took control. An Ilgauskas layup ... then an Ira Newble tip (*Ira Newble??*) ... then a Damon Jones three-pointer ... then a Daniel Gibson jumper ... followed by an Ilgauskas jumper ... and a pair of Ilgauskas free throws ... and topped off with a thundering dunk by James ... and the Cavs found themselves with a 39-27 lead halfway through the second quarter. The normally explosive Suns were missing shots, and the Cavs had completely taken them out of their usual run-and-gun game.

No, it couldn't last. The Suns clawed their way back, trimming the Cavs' lead to 45-38 at the intermission. (And when we say *intermission*, we mean

*break for a love-fest that rivaled most Super Bowl halftime shows in*

### *length*

, as Suns' chairman Jerry Colangelo was inducted into the team's hall of fame.) They erased the rest of the lead by 5:22 of the third quarter, when a Bell three-pointer knotted the contest at 53. And they never trailed the rest of the way. Interestingly, Phoenix never had a Suns-like run where they scored about a hundred points in five minutes; they just kept grinding away and gradually extending their lead. The back-breaker came with about three minutes remaining and the Cavs trailing 91-85. LeBron launched a three-point attempt early in the shot clock; Phoenix rebounded the miss, Diaw missed a jumper, but the Suns' Grant Hill collared the offensive rebound; and then Nash drilled a jumper to make it an eight-point game with 2:47 to go.

The Cavs' front line of James, Ilgauskas, and Drew Gooden had a stellar game (not too surprisingly, as the Suns' already-challenged front line was weakened further by the absence of Amare Stoudemire, whose knee flared up prior to the game). LeBron led the Cavs with 27 points and eight assists, while Z and Gooden posted nearly identical double-doubles (Z had 22 points and 13 rebounds; Gooden, 22 points and 14 boards). Nash paced all scorers with 30 points (he also had 10 assists); Marion also had a double-double with 23 points and 12 rebounds.

## **WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:**

**The First Half:** The Cavs looked like a top-tier team in the first half. No, not in terms of their shot selection, or shooting percentage, or avoiding turnovers; they were looking decidedly pedestrian in those areas. But they were controlling the game and forcing Phoenix to play a slower, more half-court oriented

contest. That's not easy to do against the Suns, who usually run as though chased by a swarm of hornets. Cleveland certainly did not play perfect defense, and the Suns helped by missing a number of wide-open perimeter bombs. But the Cavs controlled the game in the first half, and that is what top teams do.

**Maybe He Will Become A Quadruple-Double Threat:** James blocked four shots on the night, coming within one of his career best. The most memorable of the four came in the game's opening minutes; in fact, it was buried in the shot-by-shot description in the Summary section. Phoenix's Bell had a breakaway; but LeBron caught up to him and viciously swatted his layup attempt. Oh, by the way, LeBron also had the 27 points, eight assists, five boards, and a couple of steals. During the second half, he was almost single-handedly keeping the Cavs in the game. Not that anybody was *really* concerned, but he has shown that his opening night 10-point performance against Dallas was a fluke, and he's back to being The King.

**The Bald Watch, Game Three:** We are getting ever more proof that Ilgauskas's shaved head is the source of his newfound powers. He had another strong game, abusing the smaller Phoenix interior players. With 40 rebounds through three games, Z ranks fourth in the NBA in rebounds per game.

Probably his only mishap of the night was losing the opening tap to Diaw. I am not sure whether "losing the tap to a guy six inches shorter than you" or "losing the tap to a guy named Boris" is more cause for concern; you can decide that for yourselves. Besides, with Z continuing to hit his outside jumper, and continuing to play strong around the hoop, he can lose as many opening taps as he wants.

**Did We Mention That The Cavs Have A Much Taller Front Line Than The Suns?:** Not too surprisingly, given Cleveland's size advantage in the front court, the Cavs had a strong presence on the boards, out-rebounding Phoenix 51 to 40 (including a 35 to 17 edge in the first half).

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

**The Second Half:** The Cavs succeeded at not allowing Phoenix to run them out of the gym. That is like saying "the French succeeded in not allowing German troops to get to the Pyrenees." Regardless, Phoenix was able to run more in the second half; not coincidentally, they outscored the Cavs 65-47 in the final two quarters.

## It's Three Games Into The Season, And I'm Already A

**Broken Record:** Larry Hughes seems like a fine human being and has undoubtedly endured a lot of difficulties in his life. Besides, he's a Cav. I *want* him to succeed. I

*hope*

he will succeed. I

*root*

for him to succeed. But I have little faith that he

*will*

succeed. (Come to think of it, that describes The Cleveland Experience about as succinctly as possible.)

When he rises for a jumper, I do not wonder whether the ball will go in; instead, I scan the lane to see if any Cavs are in position for the inevitable rebound. When he brings the ball upcourt, I do not wonder if he will get the team in position for a hoop; I simply hope that he will safely pass the ball around the perimeter.

Two plays in particular stood out for me last night. The first came in the third quarter, after a Diaw basket gave the Suns their first lead in some time at 55-53. Mind you, that's a pretty critical point in the game. Phoenix had finally taken the lead, after the Cavs had been ahead almost the whole way. Cleveland needed to get a high-percentage shot.

You know what? This is a perfect time to break out the game of ***What Would You Do?***, which took the estimated eight readers of this column by storm last season. You're Larry Hughes, and your team has just gotten on the wrong side of "The Diff" for the first time in quite a while. You need, *need* to get points in the worst way. Do you:

a. Push the ball up the court, see if you can catch the defense off guard for a quick layup, and pull the ball back if they are in position;

b. Wait for your big men (who have a distinct size advantage, as the Suns' largest player is Diaw, who is 6'9" and weighs approximately 90 pounds) to set up, and work the ball inside;

c. Launch a three-pointer when none of your teammates

are within 30 feet of the rim, guaranteeing that there will not be an offensive rebound.

If you're Larry, option (c) is the only way to go. He missed, Phoenix' Leandro Barbosa grabbed the rebound, and a Nash jumper at the other end extended the Suns' lead and gave them that much more momentum.

The other play that absolutely burned me (and there were several contenders; I'm not even going to mention the pass to a fan in the second row) came halfway through the fourth quarter. Hughes tried to pass to Ilgauskas while the big Lithuanian was 25 feet from the basket. As strategies go, "giving Z the ball outside the three-point line" is right up there with "Britney Spears getting her license suspended, then driving with her kids in her lap." It wouldn't have made sense even if it had been completed successfully. Even worse, it *wasn't* completed successfully: the Suns' Marion slapped the pass away and drove to the other end, getting fouled in the process. The resulting free throws extended the Suns' lead to double digits. And at least

one suburban cat's ribs became sore. ( *It must have been your cat; I don't own one.* )

**Not To Pick On Larry:** Hughes had a LOT of help in the turnover department; the Cavs had 22 of them on the evening. (By contrast, the Suns had only 11.) In the spirit of embracing the suck, I would like to say that my personal favorite turnover of the night (read: *the turnover that came closest to giving me a stroke* ) was Damon Jones dribbling the ball off his foot, a truly Pavlovician effort.

**Speaking Of Sasha:** I confess that I am not the most stats-savvy observer around. So I am in the dark as to whether Sasha is officially the career NBA leader for number of times a 6'7" player has had his shots blocked. (I grant you, it's a pretty narrow category.) Let's just say that I was not exactly shocked when he tried to take Shawn Marion one-on-one, and the Matrix swatted Sasha's layup attempt. (To be fair to Sasha, it was his first game back. To be even fairer, this play came a moment after he found Gooden with a sweet pass for a dunk.)

**What Were You Thinking? (Personal Grooming Edition):** Suns reserve center (and former Cavalier) Brian Skinner is sporting a multi-colored goatee. You'd think that we'd be desensitized to these things after a season of Scot Pollard and Gooden's reverse soul patch; but Skinner's half-black, half-orange facial hair screams "man who does not own a mirror."

## **WHAT LIES AHEAD:**

The Cavs' first-week West Coast swing (proof that God, or at least David Stern, has a sick sense of humor) continues with games against Golden State on Tuesday, Utah on Wednesday, and Sacramento on Friday. Hey, you have to do the Pacific games some time; may as well get them out of the way before Thanksgiving.