

Cavs/Clippers - The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

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How 'bout them Cavs? Thrown under the bus by everyone in this town and nationally, given no chance to defend the East, and guaranteed to fall flat on their face on this early season west coast trip ... and guess what? They're 4-3 despite a brutally tough early season schedule. Between their win last night and Lola's Michael Symon winning "The Next Iron Chef" Sunday night helped salvage a tough sports weekend in CTown. John Hnat gives us the good, the bad, and the summary from last night's win.



THE SUMMARY:

It was shaping up to be one of the great Weekends of Suck in recent Cleveland/northern Ohio sports history. (*Notice that I just said "one of."* We've had quite a few of them along the way.)

The Buckeyes blew a lead and were stunned by Illinois. Instead of playing for a BCS title game berth at The Big House next Saturday, they will now be trying to avoid playing in a bowl with a third-tier sponsor ("we're proud to participate in this year's Carquest/Waffle House

Classic!").

After two straight weeks of coming back from two-touchdown deficits, the Browns saw what life was like on the other side of that fence, blowing a 21-6 lead against some team from Pennsylvania that tends to wear black and yellow uniforms (we do not refer to that organization by name in this space).

And the Cavs looked like they were going to cap off the weekend with a Heimlich-worthy choke job of their own last night against the Clippers in Los Angeles. They led by as many as 13 points early in the third quarter, after a Drew Gooden alley-oop dunk off a Daniel Gibson pass....

We need to digress at this point to clarify something for newer readers. Mr. Gibson has a nickname, apparently one that he has held since childhood. It's one that is used by most local media in referring to the second-year guard from Texas. It's one that also refers to the female anatomy, in a *Porky's/American Pie* sort of way. And it's a nickname that makes one feel about six years old when using it ... and not in a good way. So in this column, he will always be "Daniel," or maybe "Mr. Gibson." (Mind you, I'm a big fan of his. Hell, his performance against the Pistons in last season's playoffs inspired me to run the Detroit Marathon

[whi
le wearing his jersey](#)

. That may not be a good sign for him; I also wore an Indians' cap, and they lost Game Seven to the Red Sox about twelve hours later.)

Anyway, the Cavs were leading by 13 points and in seeming control of the game. "Seeming" is the key word in that last sentence, as the Clippers rattled off the next 11 points to cut the deficit to 65-63. By the end of the third quarter, thanks to a buzzer-beating jumper by Sam Cassell, the Clips held a three-point edge at 75-72. When Coach Mike Brown trotted out a lineup of Ira Newble, Devin Brown, Damon Jones, Cedric Simmons, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas to start the fourth quarter, the few remaining Cleveland sports fans who had not already sliced their wrists earlier in the day headed to the nearest bridge, ready to jump. The pessimism only grew as a dunk by the Clippers' Ruben Patterson pushed the lead to 77-72.

And then a funny thing happened. The Newble-Jones-Brown-Simmons-Z combo rattled off the next eight points, giving the Cavs the lead while LeBron James was resting on the bench. LeBron took over the fourth quarter as usual ... though not in his typical point-scoring way. Instead, he found teammate after teammate with sharp passes, racking up five of his game-high eight assists in the period. When the final buzzer sounded, the Cavs were 103-95 victors, giving them their second straight victory, and ensuring that they will not finish with a losing record on their six-game West Coast road trip. (While we're at it, Lola's Michael Symon became [the next Iron Chef](#) last night. See, the weekend wasn't that bad for Cleveland after all.)

Proving once again that there's a reason why NBA teams pay hellajack to seven footers with an offensive game, Z led the Cavs with 25 points (while shooting a very impressive 11-of-18 from the floor). Gooden and James, the other two-thirds of Cleveland's strong front line, also showed up to play - Gooden had 18 points and pulled down a season-high 17 rebounds, while LeBron had 22 points and six steals to go along with those eight helpers. For the Clippers, Cassell led the way

with 28 points, and Corey Maggette (the man who [the Cavs passed in favor of Trajan Langdon](#)), not that I am still bitter about it) added 25 points and 11 boards.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

Boy, They Suck For A Defending Conference Champion:

Because the Cavs do not have a fast-paced or terribly efficient offense, it is easy for fans to get down on them. True, they don't have a point guard. True, they stand around a lot on offense. But seven games into the season, and seven games into a pretty difficult opening to the schedule, the Cavs find themselves at 4-3 and in second place in the Central Division. Their defensive numbers have been skewed a bit (as any team's would be, after facing the high-powered offenses of both Dallas and Phoenix). Last night, though, it was precisely that defense that won them the game, as they became quite stingy in the fourth quarter.

Funny, Nobody Is Complaining About Him These Days:

Ilgauskas has been a somewhat frequent target of fan angst over the years. "He's too slow!", they say. "He can't run, he can't jump, and what is a seven-foot-three guy doing laying the ball in instead of dunking it?"

Well, he's playing pretty damn well for a big, clumsy, injury-prone guy who can't run, jump, or dunk. What he can do is hit outside shots as though they are layups ... and he showed it again last night, draining 18 footer after 18 footer. Z is now averaging almost 18 points and over 13 rebounds per game (the rebound average suffered a bit as he pulled down only six boards last night). He seems to have cut the ill-advised 12-foot hook shots out of his repertoire. He has showed up to play this year, and you would be hard-pressed to find many other pivot men who can match his production.

But He Did Grow Spores After The Game: At least for one night, Larry Hughes (who returned to action after missing three games with an injury to his left leg) was not a fungus. He scored 12 points on 5-of-8 shooting from the floor (including a "what the hell are you do ... nice shot!" three pointer; by definition, *all of* Hughes' three-point makes are of that variety) and looked as comfortable as he has all season. Mind you, 12 points in 27 minutes of action is probably not what most fans had in mind when he signed for a kazillion dollars in 2005, but it appears to be as good as it gets these days. But if I am going to pull a Steve Buffum and call the guy a fungus when he jacks up 15 bricks in a night, I have to give him credit when his jump shot is falling ... and it was last night.

I Like Him Better Now, Than When He Was Called

"Flip Murray": Devin Brown, who I will go to my grave believing is actually Flip Murray, continues to impress. He is rarely going to post gaudy stats (his 20 point/11 rebound effort against Sacramento the other night notwithstanding). He looks like one of the "glue" players that you need to have for a contender-level squad. He also dribbles the ball off his foot much less often than Sasha Pavlovic.

Speaking of Sasha, he was limited to six minutes of action last night because of back spasms, and he was ostensibly in too much pain for any silly turnovers or "Charge of the Light Brigade"-level drives to the hoop. Accordingly, last night's *Sasha Pavlovic Factor (SPF)* comes in at a **4**.

Hey, They ALL Played Like Rocket Scientists Last Night!:

Gooden, another player who has never been accused of splitting too many atoms, looked strong last night, posting his big numbers in only 30 minutes of run. (Coach Brown apparently did not want to tinker with his Z-LeBron-Newble-Devin Brown-Damon Jones squad down the stretch.) More than his game, I was impressed by his attitude.

At this point, we need to flash back to one of those right-after-the-first-half-has-ended sideline interviews from a couple of seasons ago. As I recall it (keep in mind that I cannot remember where I left my wallet most days), the Cavs were on

the last game of a three-game road trip, and had dropped the first two in disappointing fashion. They led at halftime, and because Gooden had played well, he was tabbed for the sideline interview. He made a comment about "winning one game on this road trip, which is what we wanted to do." As soon as the feed kicked back to the TNT studio, Charles Barkley was cracking on Gooden (and quite correctly), as Drew had just effectively said that the Cavs wanted to win only one of the three games.

With that image in mind, I wondered what pearls Gooden was going to drop as he opened his mouth. Instead of being content with his performance, he said that the Cavs needed to close out the quarter better (they had allowed their double-digit lead to be cut to six), saying that they should have been leading by at least ten. Am I reading way too much into one casual comment? Probably. But I like seeing the attitude change from "hey, it's fun to win half our games!" to "we're expecting to win every time out."

Somebody Wants To Be Defensive Player Of The Year: A principle espoused by Brian Windhorst, the Cavs beat writer for the Akron Beacon Journal (and occasional contributor to this site), is:

do not doubt LeBron. He will just make you look silly.

This season, LeBron has been bringing it on the defensive end, especially in the late stages of close games. Last night, he had

six steals and another blocked shot (he is well on his way to a career high in that category). He also continued a trend of guarding the opponent's toughest player down the stretch, holding the Clippers' Cassell to a relatively meaningless three-pointer in the final minute. Now, I grant you that defensive play is often subjective and based on reputation ... but I am going on record right now as saying that LeBron will be on the first-team All Defensive team at the end of this season.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

I really don't have much today; I'm in a good mood. Well, here's one thing:

The Kenny Lofton Effect: At some point last season, I believe I mentioned the *Kenny Lofton Effect*

. For Cleveland sports fans, it's the uneasy feeling of knowing that a player has performed well above his head in a game ... meaning that he will continue trying to perform well above his head in future games ... and that he will fall flat on his face trying. The principle is named after Kenny Lofton because Lofton was always good for

smacking a long home run, and then hitting easy pop-fly outs for the next week while trying to smack more long home runs.

In that vein, I'm concerned that we'll be seeing a disproportionate amount of Ira Newble in the next few games. He did have a good game last night - eight rebounds in limited action, a couple of nice hoops (including a very impressive reverse layup), pesky defense. It's good to have an end-of-the-bench player who can contribute in that fashion. But he is an end-of-the-bench player, not a first-guy-off-the-bench type. (Prediction: If he gets into the game in the first quarter tonight against Denver, the Cavs will lose. Incidentally, I am much more interested in seeing the Cavs win than in being right; so I hope Mr. Newble plays 30 minutes, gets a triple-double, and then e-mails me a picture of him holding up his middle finger after the game.)

NOT THAT YOU ASKED, BUT...

Sure, You Look Better, But Now I Have One Less Thing To Write About:

Last season, Gooden wore that inexplicable patch of hair (the "reverse soul patch") on the back of his head. Last season (actually, his entire career), the Clippers' Chris Kaman sported long, stringy hair from a badly receding hairline; he was basically in skullet territory by April. Sometime during the offseason, both men apparently discovered mirrors, realized how ridiculous they looked, and got themselves to a barber shop *tout de suite*.

So no more jokes about Gooden pasting roadkill to his scalp ... and an ever decreasing pool of opposing players with creative personal grooming choices. (Not to mention that Scot Pollard is getting next to no playing time with the Celtics.) At this rate, I am going to have to write about *basketball*

before long, and that's a scary thought.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The road trip (*did we mention that the Cavs are guaranteed to finish .500 or better on this trip?*) ends at Denver this evening. Assuming that all of the Cavs remember how to get to Quicken Loans Arena, they'll play Orlando there on Wednesday evening.