

Cavs Get Big Road Win In Big D

Written by {ga=samamico}

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Now THAT was the Cavaliers I know, love, and remember from last season. The Cavs went into Dallas, held the Mavs to 36% shooting, and emerged with a huge 88-81 road win on national television. Sam checks in this morning to recap last night's big victory, and talks also about the Cavaliers potentially reclaiming their defensive identity after a rough start to the season.



Can the Cavaliers return to the NBA Finals with the current cast?

Maybe, maybe not.

How's that for some expert analysis?

But the truth is the current cast of Cavs will not go far if it doesn't take a lesson from last season. Last year, the Cavs thought defense first.

Last year, they finished eighth in defensive field goal percentage. And last year,

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they were fifth overall in points allowed.

Compare those numbers to this year - where they are 24th in defensive field goal percentage and 17th in points allowed.

It's no wonder Coach Mike Brown has insisted the Cavs need to rediscover their identity - and that identity must begin an end with them bending their knees, shuffling their feet, and challenging shots.

That's not always easy when you have a superstar like LeBron James, who can do pretty much whatever he wants on offense. It tends to make you think that if you don't get a stop, well, no big deal. The King will somehow find a way to make up for it.

And it's usually true. James usually does indeed cover for his teammates' missed assignments. But as good as James is on offense, even he knows the Cavs have no chance if they don't get better on defense.

He's been leading by example too - as James seems more determined than ever and has made considerable improvement in that area.

He also has said repeatedly that if the Cavs defend well, they can be a team capable of beating the Mavericks on the road, as they did in a nationally-televised game on TNT. If not, they'll be the type of team that

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gets blown out by the Knicks.

Not surprisingly, the Cavs held the Mavs to a rim-rattling 36 percent shooting from the field in their 88-81 victory. That included 4-of-20 shooting on 3-pointers for the Mavs.

The Cavs scrambled on defense, crashed the boards (they finished with a 56-45 rebounding advantage) and chased down loose balls. They were scrappy.

And this style may be the only solution for a team that's extremely limited by the salary cap when it comes to making changes. Basically, the Cavs have lots of big salaries that no one else wants (read: Larry Hughes, Donyell Marshall, and Damon Jones).

This message was likely relayed to Hughes by Brown and General Manager Danny Ferry in a meeting after practice on Christmas Eve, when the three of them had a powwow in private.

It was reported the Cavs tried shopping Hughes after his horrid start, which included 29 percent shooting from the floor (and 23 percent in the seven games before Dallas). But nobody wants a guy who insists on playing shooting guard who can't shoot. Or at least, he hasn't done anything but made the rim cringe with fear this season.

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So Hughes will likely stay, and Brown's message seems to have gotten through. Namely, if Hughes defends and runs the point (for now), he will play.

"At the end of the day, you have to step up and do what it takes to put wins on the board," Hughes told reporters. "Obviously you always have personal goals that you set and a lot of times you want those personal goals to coincide with team wins. Sometimes it doesn't work that way and you have to respect that."

Meanwhile, two days before Christmas, Jones was overheard singing the popular holiday song, "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" in the locker room. Only he changed the words from "dreaming of a white Christmas" to "dreaming of a trade for Christmas."

The Cavs are trying to help Jones live his dream, but again, it ain't gonna be easy. Not with his contract (two years, more than \$8.5 million), combined with his lack of production (5.5 points per game, 40 percent shooting).

What does it all mean?

Well, the Cavs seem bent on trying to make it work with what they have, and appear to believe this unit is good enough to make another run at the Finals. That's especially the case if they reclaim their "defensive identity," as Brown likes to say.

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But if that doesn't happen within the next few weeks, the Cavs will be left with no choice but to consider some major roster changes -- and possibly, start over.