

King James Buries Blazers At Buzzer

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Wednesday, January 30 2008 7:00 PM -

After half a decade of competitive exile, Rip City has returned. The Artists Formerly Known as the Jail Blazers, back in the playoff mix with a young, dynamic group led by Brandon Roy and LeMarcus Aldridge, sailed into last night's tilt at 26-18- their best start since the 2002-03 season- and for roughly 47 minutes and 59 seconds, it looked as if they would make it 27-18 at the expense of the cold-shooting, Andy-less Cavaliers. Then- or "consequently" as Austin Carr would put it- LeBron James decided to flip the script, and those of us who stayed up on a school night were treated to yet another virtuoso performance by the wunderkind from St. Vincent-St. Mary.



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Game Recap by Quarter

First Quarter

The Cavaliers got off to a 10-2 lead in the opening minutes, but the surge didn't last very long. The Blazers stepped back from Cleveland's first punch, shook their heads, grinned, and embarked on a 27-7 run, leading by as many as 12 and taking a 29-20 advantage at the end of the quarter. Portland scored in bulk in quarter one, piling up a pair of three-pointers and three three-point plays- 15 points on just five shots. The Blazers also didn't commit a single turnover in the period.

Second Quarter

Cleveland put together a 14-4 run spanning the end of the first and beginning of the second quarter to cut the Portland lead to 33-31, but the Trail Blazers responded with a 15-6 spurt to build their lead back up to ten. The Rip City run was punctuated by a relative rarity- a technical foul on Mike Brown, who earned the 'T' disputing a charging call on LBJ late in the period. At halftime it was 48-42 in favor of Portland.

The Blazers shot a frosty 33 percent for the half, but the bulk of that damage was done in the opening moments of each quarter, when they shot a combined 3-for-23. Aside from the shooting percentage, Portland was solid, dishing out ten assists, making 14-of-15 free throws, grabbing eight offensive rebounds, and committing just three turnovers. Brandon Roy led the way with team-highs in points (11) rebounds (five), and assists (three)

The Cavaliers, for their part, shot 44 percent in the half, but committed nine turnovers and were a tepid 9-of-14 from the free-throw line. LeBron was the only Cavalier in double-figures, with 13 points, and he also yanked down nine rebounds. With 43 seconds left in the second period, LBJ twisted his left ankle on a driving layup and limped to the bench. Although he's not up there with Vince Carter or Dwayne Wade in the pantheon of NBA drama queens, LeBron does like to ham it up a little bit when he gets banged up; still, it's tough not to suck in your breath when the King pulls up lame.

Third Quarter

LeBron came out for the third quarter, which was good. The Cavaliers also got off to their usual flat second-half start, which was not good. Cleveland scored just four points in the first four minutes, as Portland stretched the lead back out to eleven. It got worse; while the Cavaliers wasted their energy carping at the refs, the Trail Blazers continued to distribute and crash the boards, methodically building their lead to 66-52 late in the period. The Wine & Gold finally woke up late in the quarter, using a 10-2 run to cut the deficit to six at the end of three.

Fourth Quarter

Cleveland had used its small lineup- with LeBron at the four and Dwayne Jones in the pivot- to slice into the lead, and kept it on the floor at the beginning of the final period. But when Portland made it a ten-point game, Coach Brown put Z back in the game. It was 76-68 at the 6:57 mark when LBJ tweaked his recently injured hand in a collision

with Sergio Rodriguez. After a few of his trademark winces and a Cavaliers timeout, LeBron was back on the floor.

Portland built the lead back up to eleven again, at 81-70, with 4:30 to play. That's when a night that seemingly belonged to the Blazers was expropriated by the King. A pair of LBJ three-balls sandwiched around a Gooden bucket made it 81-78. Then LeBron hit another three to finish the quick 11-0 run and tie the game at 81 apiece. The Blazers re-took the lead on a Travis Outlaw jumper, Gooden split a pair at the line, and, after a couple of Portland possessions came up empty- including one that ended when a potential game-clinching three-pointer by Steve Blake rimmed out- the Cavaliers got the ball back with 4.9 to play, trailing 83-82.

Everyone knew who was going to get the ball. It didn't matter. LeBron took the inbounds pass, sized up Brandon Roy like a fat kid sizes up a Twix bar, roared by him, changed hands, and kissed a left-handed layup in off the glass with 0.3 left, putting Cleveland into the lead for the first time since the midway point of the first quarter. A desperate Portland lob was stolen by- (who else?) LeBron and that was it. Cavaliers win, 84-83. Game, set, thievery.

Remember, though- LeBron can't close games. Skip Bayless says so.

Odds and Ends

How the game was won: The same way this team has won for the last three seasons- defense, rebounding, and LeBron. The Cavaliers held the Blazers to 35 percent from the floor and were downright smothering in the crunch, as Portland tallied just two points in the last four-and-a-half minutes. Cleveland out-rebounded the Blazers 49-43 and committed just three second-half turnovers. And LBJ was his usual magnificent, team-carrying self, scoring 17 points in the fourth quarter, including 11 in the final 14-2 run that won the game.

LeBron's line: 37 points, 14 rebounds, four assists, two steals, two blocks. I was actually set to write sometime around the middle of the fourth quarter that he played "tentatively" in the second half. Then he did that thing where he completely took over and basically won the game single-handedly, so that little *bon mot* went flying out the window.

Other heroes: None, really. No Cavalier aside from #23 scored more than nine points. Big Z shot just 3-for-9, although he did pull down 13 boards. Larry Hughes abused the rims as usual, clanging away at a 2-for-11 clip. The two-headed monster of Cedric Simmons and Dwayne Jones, spelling the shelved Varejao, put up a combined four points and one rebound in 14 minutes (to be fair, Jones did hit four clutch free throws late in the third quarter and early in the fourth, keeping the Cavs in the game when they were teetering on the edge of being blown

out).

The Cavaliers as a team shot just 39 percent from the field, 68 percent from the line, and dished out a meager 13 assists. They didn't play particularly well and, frankly, should have lost. But hey, that's the beauty of having the best player on Earth in a Wine & Gold kit.

One non-King bright spot, however: Drew Gooden had nine points and seven rebounds, and played pretty good defense- or at any rate, didn't do anything egregiously dumb on defense, which counts as "pretty good" in Drew's case. He also scored more points in the first thirty seconds of the game (two), than he had in the previous two games combined (one). So we can at least take him off the side of the milk carton... for now.

Next: the Cavaliers stay in the Pacific Northwest and go for their second consecutive perfect road trip at Seattle, tomorrow night at 10:00.