

LeBron Returns, Cavs Roll Clippers 98-84

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Coming off the foul-tasting loss in Seattle, Saturday night presented an ideal get-healthy scenario for the Cavaliers. The Los Angeles Clippers were shorthanded and on the second night of a back-to-back, having been skinned by the dismal Timberwolves in the Twin Cities on Friday. The Cavs found out shortly before tip that LeBron would play, and the rest of the evening was more or less academic. L.A. was a nuisance at first, but Cleveland seized control immediately after halftime and won going away 98-84, maintaining possession of the Eastern Conference's fourth spot.



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But even a short-handed, winded opponent with a 14-29 record is tall timber to a Cavaliers team without the King, and the biggest drama of the day wound up being the announcement, shortly before game-time, that #23 would indeed suit up and start for the Wine & Gold. The rest of the evening was more or less academic. L.A. was a nuisance at first, but Cleveland seized control immediately after halftime and won going away 98-84, maintaining possession of the Eastern Conference's fourth spot.

Game Recap by Quarter

First Quarter

Larry Hughes started the night with a three-pointer that clanged off the rim like a large steel object hitting a church bell, and that set the tone for the opening moments. Cleveland missed its first seven shots, and neither team hit from the field until the 8:40 mark. Still, for all their bricklaying, the Cavaliers were aggressive early, driving to the hoop and getting L.A. into foul trouble. Sam Cassell picked up two personals in the first three minutes and took a seat. Then Brevin Knight picked up his second within two minutes, as LBJ and his cohort pounded the paint with a vengeance. The Clips proved pesky, riding the early heroics of Josh Powell (eight first-quarter points) to a 23-19 lead in front of a sometimes-grumbling throng at the Q.

Second Quarter

Cleveland continued to pound the ball down low- especially to Z, who operated with impunity against L.A.'s depleted front line. Ilgauskas poured in the first seven Cavalier points, but with the crowd mumbling in the backcourt, the Cavaliers sans a temporarily bench-bound LeBron got sloppy and fell behind 34-33. LBJ came back in and jump-started things going with distribution. He hit Ilgauskas with a soft-tossed beauty which Z turned into a foul; a split-pair tied it, and another split-pair from Hughes off another LBJ feed put the Cavaliers in front at the 4:10 mark. Then LBJ and Mobley got into a quick private three-point shooting contest: Mobley's 2-1 win made it 39-38 Clips. The Clips, getting large

contributions from rookie Al Thornton (23 points, 14 above his average) stretched it out to 47-42, but LBJ found Boobie for a three-pointer, and the halftime score was 47-45.

AC "proven fact" of the night: You'll score 80-90 percent of the time you get to halfcourt before the other team.

Third Quarter

Drew Gooden scored on a put-back to tie it at the outset of the third quarter, and consecutive LBJ alley-oops to Larry Hughes- clad in his [Vince Carter-style](#) soccer uniform- put the Cavaliers up 51-49. The entire team moved well early in the third; Ira Newble chipped in with consecutive buckets, and Z crashed the boards to put back a Hughes miss, making it 59-55 Cavaliers. The Clippers took a timeout at the 6:35 mark, having seen their lead turn into a 61-55 deficit.

The Cavaliers continued to dominate, especially in the frontcourt. A coast-to-coast ramble by LBJ, using his blockers downfield, made it 72-63 Cavs. The pattern was clear; when Cleveland pounded it to Z and Drew, good things happened. The Clips continued to hang around, and at the end of three, it was 73-69 in favor of the Cavaliers. Cleveland scored 28 points in the third, making 12 of its first 18 shots and coming up with five offensive rebounds, four turned into baskets.

Fourth Quarter

Cleveland turned up the defense in the fourth, and that, along with the heroics of The King, made the ultimate difference. The Clippers went scoreless for the first three-and-a-half minutes. Cleveland didn't, ripping off an 11-0 run: LBJ got the crowd going near the end of the sequence, fancy-dribbling Cuttino Mobley like Earl Boykins to a Duke guard in the '96 Tournament, and penetrating for what ultimately became a Z putback and a 79-69 Cavalier lead at the 9:28 mark

L.A. closed the lead to 82-76 before LeBron again seized the joystick, voodooing the defense for a lay-up and making it a ten-point game on a pair of free throws. Z tossed in a couple of more buckets and when LBJ went down Main Street for a violent, double-pump punch, it was 92-80 Cavaliers with 2:59 left and, for all intents and purposes, oh-vah. The Clippers went quietly from there.

Odds and Ends

How the game was won: Cleveland recognized its advantage in the frontcourt and exploited it. The starting frontcourt combined for 64 points, 36 rebounds, and 11 assists, and five blocks, and as a team out-rebounded L.A.'s NBA step-child 50-35. The fourth-quarter defense was superb, as the Clippers scored just 15 points and shot 4-of-20 for the period.

LeBron's line: 28 points on 8-of-19 shooting, with 11 rebounds and 7 assists, with lock-down fourth-quarter defense on Cuttino

Mobley, who had been a thorn all night before #23 decided he wasn't going to be anymore. Offensively LBJ turned top priority to facilitating his bigs, taking over when he had to. Like Magic Johnson, the King can dominate a game when he isn't shooting well. He did on Saturday.

Other heroes: Drew and Z stepped up against inferior competition- just what they should do. Gooden, deciding to show up, went for 14 and 12 on six-of-ten shooting, and Ilgauskas played the beautiful game: 22 points, 13 rebounds, 4 assists, and 4 blocks. The big fella was a force on both ends tonight, and was just flat-out fun to watch.

One nice, atypical surprise: Generally as flat as the Eagles in Super Bowl XV coming out of the halftime dressing room, Cleveland turned up the energy after intermission tonight. The Cavaliers outscored the Clippers 53-37 in the second half, doing what elite teams are supposed to do: relentlessly applying their strengths against an out-manned opponent.

Next: a showdown with East leader Boston, 7:00 Tuesday night at the Q.