

Shorthanded Cavs Dispel Magic

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Monday, February 11 2008 7:00 PM -

Coming off a 30 point home loss, wracked with injuries, and on the second of back to back games after weather troubles that had them arrive in Orlando late (to play a well rested Magic team) ... Cavs fans had a good reason to be uneasy about last night's tilt with the Magic. Despite all this, the Cavs stunned Orlando 118-111, pulling to within a game of the Magic in the loss column for the third spot in the Eastern Conference playoff race.



Monday night's clash with the Magic in Orlando seemed fraught with peril at the outset. Not only had the Cavaliers put on probably their worst performance of the season in being waxed by Denver at home, they didn't even leave Cleveland for Florida until Monday morning, thanks to the awful weather in Northeast Ohio. It was the second night of a back-to-back and the back end of a four games-in-five night stretch, three of them on the road. Add in that Orlando was rested, having not played since Friday, and the situation seemed ready-made for catastrophe.

Instead the shorthanded Cavaliers displayed the form that has made them, if not one of the NBA's most physically gifted teams, one of its grittiest. In perhaps their finest overall effort of the season, they stunned Orlando 118-111, pulling to within a game of the Magic in the loss column for the third spot in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

Game Recap by Quarter

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First Quarter

With Drew Gooden back in uniform, four of the five regular starters were present and accounted for. LeBron started out in distributor mode, getting his teammates involved, then crammed home his first two of the night at the 6:57 mark, tying the score at 10-10. Behind some hot early shooting by Drew Gooden (eight first-period points), the Cavaliers competed well for most of the quarter but never led, and the Magic used a late 10-2 run to take a 28-20 lead at the end of the stanza. Double-teaming the Cavaliers were Jameer Nelson (eight points) and Dwight Howard (ten, while doing whatever he wanted down low). Taking most of their shots from point-blank range, Orlando shot 12-of-18 in the period and won the rebounding battle, 7-5.

Second Quarter

LBJ asserted himself as the second period began. After the Magic stretched their lead to 30-20, a three-pointer and a three-point play by the King cut the lead to six with ten minutes to play in the half. Moments later, a LeBron feed and a Donyell Marshall three extended the run to 17-6 and gave Cleveland its first lead of the night, 37-36.

Cleveland led 41-39 when Howard and Nelson re-entered the game at the 6:11 mark, and from there the Magic gradually re-gained control. A pair of three-point plays by Howard and Nelson gave Orlando a 55-51 lead. LeBron split a pair of free throws to make it 55-52, and that's how the half ended.

Cleveland's temporary problems in the frontcourt and permanent problems containing small, quick guards were painfully evident in the halftime numbers. Howard and Nelson combined for 24 points on 9-for-14 shooting in the first half, with Nelson's penetration creating open looks for his teammates, particularly Hedo Turkoglu (12 points on 5-of-6 from the field). As a team, Orlando shot a blistering 57.9% for the half.

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The Cavaliers weren't far off from that pace, shooting 53.7%, including an efficient 3-of-5 from three-point range. Most of that success came via the outside jumper, a dangerous strategy with tired legs. They also held their own on the boards, finishing the half tied 18-18 in the rebounding battle, and got 16 points from their bench- all but two of those from Donyell Marshall and Devin Brown (nine second-quarter points). LeBron was LeBron, leading the way with 13 points, five rebounds, and four assists.

Third Quarter

The big question entering the second half was whether or not the Cavaliers would be able to avoid their typical third-quarter swoon, especially on the second night of a back-to-back. They did, but only by the hardest. Fueled by a pair of Rashard Lewis threes, Orlando built a five-point lead, but Cleveland grimly hung in, despite losing Z to his fourth foul early in the period. Each time the Magic threatened to take command, the Cavaliers found a way to stay in it. Orlando's lead never grew above five, and seven straight points by a suddenly white-hot Larry Hughes finally knotted the score at 75-apiece with 3:15 left.

Orlando quickly re-took the lead on Rashard Lewis's third trey of the quarter, but the Magic still hadn't figured out a way to stop Hughes. With 48 seconds remaining in the quarter, Larry converted a three-point play to give the Cavaliers their first lead of the half, 84-81. At the end of three, the score was tied 86-86, Cleveland was still shooting 56%, had scored thirty-plus points in two consecutive quarters, and Larry Hughes had dropped in 23 points on 6-of-7 shooting in the third. Wow.

Fourth Quarter

The Cavaliers stayed smoking in the fourth quarter, starting the period on a 12-2 run (including a technical foul on a mightily displeased Stan Van Jeremy) to take a 98-88 lead at the 8:12 mark. Looking like the fresher team on the floor, Cleveland

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spread the floor and attacked the basket beautifully on offense, and crashed the boards with a vengeance on defense.

Orlando sliced the lead to four at 99-95. Then LeBron took over. A drive to the hoop made it 101-95; then the King powered in a three-point play to make it a nine-point game at the 4:32 mark. After a Nelson lay-up, LeBron fed Hughes, who dropped in a three-pointer to bump the lead back up to ten at 107-97. LBJ finished off the 10-2 run with a pair of free throws to make it 109-97 with 3:35 left.

Back-to-back buckets by Turkoglu, including a three-ball, cut it to 109-102 with less than two minutes remaining. Then Larry Hughes, appropriately enough, applied the knockout punch. With time running out on the shot clock, Hughes drilled a desperation three-pointer, making it 112-102 with a minute-and-a-half left. From there it was a matter of hitting free throws and withstanding the last Magic barrage and the Cavaliers did enough of both to take it home, 118-111.

Now *that* was a monumental win.

Odds and Ends

How the game was won: The Cavaliers won this game with- you heard right- offense. Cleveland shot 53.5% from the field, 9-of-14 from long range, dished out 21 assists, and made more free throws (33) than the Magic attempted (29). Considering the potential for tired legs and the fact that this isn't a particularly good offensive squad even at the best of times, it was an amazing performance. Combine that with the usual tough fourth-quarter defense- Orlando scored just two points in the crucial first four minutes of the period- and you have the ingredients for a huge win.

LeBron's line: 29 points, 10 assists, and seven rebounds on 8-for-15 from the field and 12-for-15 from the line. The King had been unable to take his usual

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afternoon nap prior to the game. It didn't seem to cramp his style too badly.

Other heroes: You name them. Devin Brown came off the bench to score 11 on 4-of-5 shooting, including those nine second-quarter points that got the Cavaliers back in the game when they were in danger of being blown out. Dwayne Jones played 22 minutes thanks to Z's foul trouble and scored only two points, but his active defense on Dwight Howard helped stymie the Orlando phenom, who scored just six points after his big opening quarter. Drew Gooden came back to the lineup and provided an early jolt of energy.

Last, but far from least, was Larry Hughes: 12-of-19 from the floor, 12-of-13 from the line, 4-of-5 from downtown, for 40 points- 23 in the third quarter and 33 in the second half. I can say without reservation that this was Larry's best performance in a Cleveland uniform. The man takes a lot of heat around here, and deservedly so- but he was magnificent in this one.

Next: The Cavaliers finish off the first half of the season at home on Wednesday evening against San Antonio. The All-Star Break can't get here soon enough.