

Series Notes: Cavs/Wizards

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Tuesday, April 22 2008 7:00 PM -

Two up, two down. After absorbing blow after blow from fans and the media, it appears that reports of the Cavaliers' demise have been greatly exaggerated. There's a reason why they actually play the game, and there's a reason why it's never wise to count a team out when they still have LeBron James on the roster. Nick drops in with some Cavs/Wizards series notes for us this morning.



Two up, two down. After absorbing blow after blow from fans and the media, it appears that reports of the Cavaliers' demise have been greatly exaggerated. There's a reason why they actually play the game, and there's a reason why it's never wise to count a team out when they still have LeBron James on the roster.

The Cavs survived a hard-fought series opener and stupefied the Wizards in game two, which turned into a laugh. With a commanding 2-0 lead, the series now turns to Washington as LeBron James and the Cavaliers look to send Washington home for the summer.

Here are some of my impressions from the first two games, in no particular order.

Tallest on the team, flying under the radar. Zydrunas Ilgauskas is among the league's most underrated players. Ilgauskas has the rare ability stretch the floor

from the center position, and is positively un-guardable when his jump shot is falling. He's an excellent free throw shooter (80.3-percent this season) at a position where players typically struggle from the line. While it's not his greatest strength, Ilgauskas' passing ability is better than many would think. Z's chemistry with LeBron James, particularly on the pick and roll, is also extremely valuable.

Although the Cavs probably could have won game two without Ilgauskas, he played a crucial role in the Cavaliers' victory in the series opener. Z scored 22 points on a decent 7-of-17 from the field (a perfect 8-for-8 from the line), grabbed 11 rebounds, and dished out 4 assists. Ilgauskas gave Mike Brown that all-important second scorer behind LeBron James (and his usual 30-plus points), keeping the Wizards honest and preventing them from consistently sending double or triple-teams LeBron's way.

Is Wally finally right? Mike Brown was wrong to start Wally Szczerbiak during this series. With Sasha Pavlovic unable to find a rhythm all season (holdout, injuries) and on the fritz for this series, Devin Brown should have been given the nod at shooting guard.

Whether in a starting or reserve role, Brown has been one of the few constants on the team all year long, consistently providing coach Brown with quality minutes, and he earned the starting job when Pavlovic faltered. When I heard that Wally World was starting game one, I had to pick my jaw up off the floor.

Wally hit an early three in game one, but other than that he was pretty useless, scoring just eight points on an ugly 2-of-10 shooting. If Wally isn't scoring, and isn't shooting a reasonable percentage, then there's no reason for him to be on the floor because he's such a defensive liability.

In game two Szczerbiak woke up, scoring 15 points on 6-of-9 shooting, including 2-of-5 from downtown. A sharp-shooting Szczerbiak would be a major boon to Cavaliers' chances of getting by Boston in round two (assuming that they can

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close out the Wizards), but like I said before, if Wally isn't shooting well, Mike Brown simply can't afford to play him because he's such a burden defensively.

Caron Butler has been taking Wally to school off the dribble because Szczerbiak just doesn't have the lateral quickness to stick with the league's better guards and swingmen. Don't be surprised if Eddie Jordan runs more of his offense directly at Szczerbiak in game three.

Speaking of Eddie Jordan... He's probably one of the league's more underrated coaches.

[Terrence Dashon Howard](#) - I mean, [Jord](#)

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held the Wizards together in spite of the fact that Gilbert Arenas missed 69 games this season, and Jordan's boys were actually winning the Southeast Division for much of the season. Fun fact: Eddie Jordan is the longest tenured coach in the Eastern Conference, after coaching only five years in the District of Columbia.

For game two of the 2006 Eastern Quarterfinals, Howard concocted one of the most creative and effective defensive schemes, in terms of stopping LeBron James, that I've ever seen. Jordan's Wizards played LeBron's penchant for setting up his teammates against him, feigning a double-team when LeBron crossed the timeline and then sagging off of LeBron to intercept his passes. It worked like a charm; Washington beat Cleveland 89-84, James scored 26 points but shot an extremely inefficient 7-of-25, and King James was forced into a ridiculous 10 turnovers.

You had to feel for Jordan when things turned ugly during the second half of Monday's game. Jordan was clearly out of answers, and looked completely defeated. I didn't like seeing Jordan that way, but if that's the price of two more blowout victories for the Cavs, I'll just have to suck it up (that's some sarcasm, there).

Buck up, big men. Regardless of who's on defense (Z, Big Ben, Andy, Joe

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Smith), Washington's centers have been shoving Cleveland's guys around and having their way on offense. Both Brendan Haywood and Andray Blatche, especially Haywood, have been muscling for position on offense, and doing so effectively. These guys have been getting set up way to close to the hoop, and it's cost the Cavs numerous cheap baskets.

This hasn't been a huge problem so far, mainly because Haywood and Blatche don't take a high percentage of the Wizards' shots, but the pair are a combined 13-of-20 in the series. If the Wizards ever wake up and realize that their centers are getting so many easy looks, the Cavs will have to adjust quickly, or the series might head back to the North Shore for at least a fifth game.

Much ado about nothing. Ben Wallace has been chastised by fans for his offense, or lack thereof, and such criticisms are unnecessary. While Wallace isn't a high volume scorer, he's relatively efficient, so while his offense does little to buoy the Cavs, it doesn't do anything to sink them, either.

Consider that Drew Gooden, Wallace's predecessor at the power forward position, was shooting 44.4-percent for the Cavs this season. Wallace shot a comparable, although slightly superior, 45.7 percent. The big difference is that Gooden was shooting that percentage while taking 10.3 shots per game, while Wallace took only 3.7. While Wallace was only good for 4.2 points per game in the regular season, he wasn't a drain on the offense because he wasn't shooting. Gooden's 10.3 shots per game took shots away from the team's two best scorers, James and Ilgauskas. Ben Wallace isn't going to turn any heads with big scoring numbers, but he won't drag the offense down, either.

Wallace has continued to play within himself in the playoffs, taking only five shots in the series (all in game two, and all dunks or layups), and making three of them. When Big Ben doesn't have a high percentage shot to take, he passes it off so the team's scorers can shoot. It's not ideal to start a player with very limited offensive skills, but by the same token, Wallace's limited skills aren't single-handedly deactivating the Cavaliers' possessions (see: Hughes, Larry). Give Ben a break.

A sight for sore eyes. It sure is nice to have Daniel Gibson back in the fold. Gibson has scored 24 points (8-17 shooting, 4-7 from deep) in the series' opening two games, and although he'd been back for 10 games since missing 22 of 24 games in February and March, Gibson had struggled to find a rhythm. It looks like the playoffs were just what the doctor ordered, along with some snack wraps and large sweet teas.

Boobie (I'll finally concede to calling him that, but I don't have to like it) is playing like the Boobie of old, and just like last year's Eastern Conference Finals, he's been a sparkplug for the Cavaliers. However, it looks like the effects of Gibson's left high ankle sprain are lingering a bit, because Boobie's speed and quickness are not what they used to be. That said, as long as Gibson can shoot, he will play a valuable role for the Cavs as they continue their playoff run.

Good guys win, bad guys lose. The Wizards' commitment to defending LeBron James in a "physical" (an athlete's code word for "dirty") fashion has turned them into the bad guys in this series. Particularly in game two, Washington didn't come out swinging, they came out shoving. Washington wanted to wrap LeBron James up, beat him up when he came inside, and keep his old fashioned three-point play opportunities at a bare minimum. With the latter, who can blame them?

But instead of just fouling "hard," the Wizards took this tough guy mentality too far, and were thrown off their game mentally. Gilbert Arenas was hit with a technical foul for shoving Wally Szczerbiak during the first half, and intentionally tripped Delonte West in the second half. Brendan Haywood shoved LeBron James in midair, clearly making no attempt for the basketball, and was ejected. Andray Blatche has hit LeBron in the face multiple times during the first two games. None of this has helped Washington make any progress. By trying to get into the Cavaliers' heads, the Wizards have been taken out of theirs.

And if there's one thing that the rest of the NBA should have learned about LeBron James by now, it's that hard fouls, especially dirty fouls, don't deter him.

Dirty fouls don't stop LeBron, they merely incite his wrath. I said it before the series and I'll say it again: antagonizing LeBron James, whether it be physically or verbally, is not wise. James is the most physically gifted player of his generation, and as an opposing player infuriating James would be the last thing on my list. You don't want to give this guy an extra incentive to bury you.

No suspension for Haywood. Brendan Haywood's now infamous hit on LeBron James will not be punished with a suspension. That's the right call. Haywood's hit was dirty, it was definitely a flagrant foul because he made no attempt for the ball and the contact was excessive. The foul was probably a Flagrant 2 because the excessive contact appeared to be intentional, so Haywood's ejection was justified.

Also, at that point in the game tempers were flaring and violence was escalating. If someone wasn't punished, the fouls were only going to get more and more severe, or worse: a full-fledged fight could have erupted. Ejecting Haywood helped stave off a melee, but that hit wasn't bad enough to merit a suspension, and while it would benefit the Cavs to have Brendan Haywood watching game three on television, it wouldn't be fair.

Wine & Gold beats Gold. Will Washington's front office puh-leeze pull the plug on those positively repellent [gold jerseys](#) already? Without a doubt among the worst in the NBA, the Wizards' threads look even worse when contrasted against the Cavs' excellent uniform design. Honestly, Washington's goofy duds, along with the Sacramento Kings' [gold abominations](#), should be yanked from the shelves immediately, taken out back, and given the Old Yeller treatment.

Killer instinct. It's that elusive quality fans have been searching for from LeBron James' Cavaliers for a long time, and have rarely seen. On Monday, LBJ and friends gave us all we could handle.

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The Cavs established a five-point lead in the first quarter, built it to 13 by the half, and instead of letting Washington hang around, they went for the jugular. Midway through the third quarter, the game was over. The lead was increased to 23 by the end of the third, and 30 when the final horn sounded. Even during last season's magical playoff run, the Cavs had trouble putting teams away (game six of the Conference Finals sticks out as an exception). Hopefully this is a sign of things to come. This is a different Cavs team, King James is one year wiser, and maybe, just maybe, the Cavs have finally learned how to deal an opponent a knockout blow.