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Wednesday night, the half-speed Cavs showed up and lost Game 5 to the Wizards 88-87, and because of that, Cleveland's backs are a couple feet closer to the wall. The series heads back to Washington for Game 6 on Friday. A Wizards win there, and a series that was once firmly in the Cavs' grasp would be decided by a Game 7.

Few people in Cleveland are doubting that the Cavs can still win one of the next two. But after having watched the Indians blow a 3-1 series lead to the Red Sox a mere seven months ago, the idea of a Wizards rally has now moved from the backs of our minds to somewhere in the middle.

The sad fact is, if the Wizards even force a Game 7, this series would already be

a failure for the Cavs on some levels.

With the Hawks already having forced the Celtics to a Game 6 (the Celtics now lead the series 3-2), a Cavs win Wednesday night would have meant a few precious extra days for the Cavs' aging frontcourt to rest their backs, knees, ankles and whatever else is aching them. By letting the Wizards prolong the series, the Cavs give a great deal of the rest advantage back. When it comes to a potential second-round matchup featuring Ben Wallace, Joe Smith and Zydrunas Ilgauskas versus Ray Allen and Kevin Garnett, all oldie-goldies in their 30s with assorted bum leg joints and bad backs, the rest advantage could go a long way toward determining a winner.

But first things first. The Wizards are still alive and well in the postseason, and probably feel like they have a new lease on life after rallying from five points down with less than two minutes to play and enduring a miss by LeBron at the buzzer, on yet another Cavs final play that looked like it was executed by salmon swimming upstream.

We can look at the stat line and see the reasons the Cavs lost by the numbers. They shot 36 percent from the floor. They very nearly let the much smaller Wizards beat them on the glass, edging them 40-39. Zydrunas Ilgauskas had 19 points, Delonte West 12 and Joe Smith nine, but no other member of the James Gang was able to do anything to augment LeBron's 34 points. Wally Szczerbiak continues to look like a benchwarmer, scoring four points and coughing up a critical fourth-quarter turnover in nearly 18 minutes of action. And he's supposedly a starter.

They didn't have a solution for Caron Butler, who finished with 32 points and looked like a worthy, Carmelo Anthony-caliber adversary for LeBron. He was LeBron's superior in the clutch shooting department, cutting through the Cavs' interior defense and scoring the winning bucket on a runner over Wallace that rolled around the rim before falling in with 3.9 seconds to play.

Here's a secret that the Wizards don't want you to know: When Gilbert Arenas doesn't play -- and he won't for the rest of Washington's season due to continued knee problems -- the Wizards are actually a better team. They play better team basketball without the presence of their hip-shooting supposed leader who tries to solve every problem by jacking up a 30-footer.

When Arenas is out, guys with far better all-around games like Butler and Antawn Jamison step up, and the Wizards actually become more formidable. If Butler continues to play like he did Wednesday night, I don't like where this series is headed one bit.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. The Cavs knew they blew a game they should have won, a game in which they played sloppy ball for way too long and trailed for the majority of the 48, a game in which they took their collective mental foot off the gas because they thought they had everything signed and sealed with a late five-point lead.

Most of all, LeBron will take the floor in Game 6 looking to atone for the sins of Game 5. But now he and his teammates will have to once again fight the road playoff environment in Washington's Verizon Center, the "overrated" chants, the trash talking and, more than anything, a Wizards team that now wholeheartedly believes they have a chance to pull this series out.

The Cavs have overcome the worst the Verizon Center has thrown at them so far. It didn't stop West from inserting the dagger in Game 4. If they overcome a hostile road environment one more time and close this series out on Friday, then Game 5 can be swept under the rug and forgotten.

But if the Wizards prevail and force a winner-take-all Game 7, the Cavs will have already lost in one form, even with a Game 7 slated for the friendly confines of The Q.

For the remainder of this series, whether they ultimately advance or suffer a humiliating collapse that sends them home for the summer, the Cavs will have to carry one extra burden on top of everything else: It never should have gotten to this point, and they have no one to blame but themselves that it has.