

Beatdown In Beantown

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Thursday, May 08 2008 7:00 PM -

The Cavaliers played about a half-quarter of outstanding basketball on Thursday night. The other three-and-a-half were a pit of relentless suck, a pit as deep as the 0-2 hole they're in as they go back to Cleveland, having absorbed an 89-73 thumping at the hands of the Celtics. It was another horrific night for LeBron James, the second leg of probably the worst back-to-back performance of his career. Will things improve at the Q? They'd better. Or this series will be over, quickly.



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Game Recap

The night started well- very well, actually. Coming out on fire from the outside and paced by six straight swishes by Z, the Cavaliers blew out to a 21-9 lead with three minutes left in the first quarter. So far, so good?

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So what.

The seeds of Cleveland's destruction lay in that first-quarter spurt. The Cavaliers built their dozen-point lead on the perimeter, and for this team, the perimeter is fool's gold. When the shots stopped falling in the second quarter, the bottom dropped out. Trailing 24-17 at the end of the first quarter, Boston proceeded to embark on a 37-12 run spanning the entire second quarter and the first two minutes of the third. The breakdown was comprehensive: not only did the Cavaliers seize up completely offensively; they were also beaten badly on hustle plays and hammered on the boards. Boston's bench, especially Sam Cassell and Leon Powe, led the revival, and the C's starters picked it up from there. The Cavaliers deficit swelled to as many as 24 early in the fourth period before they came back to make it look semi-respectable in garbage time.

The worst part wasn't that the Cavaliers lost. It was that they basically quit in the third quarter, allowing the C's to open the period on a 10-0 run and run away with it from there. The shooting wasn't there, and that happens. But the effort wasn't there either. It's one thing to get beat. It's another thing to look beaten- and the Cavaliers looked like a beaten team on Thursday night.

It isn't time to throw in the towel quite yet. All it takes is one win to change the tenor of a series, and if the Cavaliers can pull one off on Saturday, they'll be back in this thing. But boy, things do not look good. They look downright Finals-ish, actually.

Odds and Ends

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How the game was lost: When you shoot 35.6 percent, including 2-of-13 from behind the arc, when you get out-rebounded 45-39, when you give up 12 offensive rebounds, when you commit 15 turnovers to only 18 assists, and when you score 73 points, on the road, you're going to lose to just about every NBA team that doesn't reside in Dade County, including a team with the best record in the Association. The Cavaliers have scored 72 and 73 points in the first two games of this series. Not much more needs to be said.

LeBron's line: 21 points on 6-of-24 from the field, with six assists, five rebounds, and seven turnovers. That's 8-of-42 with 17 turnovers in the first two games. I doubt he's had a worse back-to-back stretch in his career. Boston is employing San Antonio's tactics on LBJ- keep him on the perimeter when possible, and force him into a cul-de-sac of shot-blockers in the lane- and it's working beautifully. LeBron is a streak shooter at the best of times, and right now, the shots aren't falling. As a matter of fact, they aren't even close. He threw up at least three airballs tonight, along with a number of others that alternately grazed and clanked off the rim. Even lay-up attempts that are usually cotton candy for LeBron aren't going in. Right now it looks like a certain departed, heavily-tattooed, volume-shooting guard from St. Louis has come back to Cleveland, and invaded the body of the King. We might need an exorcist for Saturday.

Look, I am boundless in my respect and admiration for LeBron James. The man single-handedly saved professional basketball in this city, he's been wonderful before, and he'll be wonderful again. But he has to develop some kind of reliable mid-range jump shot, and he has to get down in the post and play as a power forward a lot more often than he's doing right now. When LBJ gets the ball below the foul line on the move he's the most unstoppable force in the NBA. But that chiseled 6'8", 250-pound frame is wasted when he runs around the perimeter all night, crashing into screens, chucking up forced jumpers, and attempting to split double-teams with sometimes questionable results.

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It's not all his fault. No one in the Association is asked to do more than LeBron James, who never has a shot created for him by someone else while having to create shots for everyone else. This team is badly in need of a true point guard who can keep him off the ball, penetrate and create those easy opportunities. But we don't have one of those, and it's one of those sick ironies of Cleveland sports that a franchise which has seemingly always enjoyed good point guard play, from Fouts Walker to John Bagley to Mark Price to Terrell Brandon to Andre Miller, lacks one now, when a point guard might be the only thing keeping this team from a legitimate shot at a title.

Other heroes: In a letter, Z. The big man had the stroke working tonight, hitting on 9-of-12 from the field and scoring 19 points. Boston has no answers for him, and although I'm not nearly as tough on Mike Brown's offensive "philosophy" as most fans- this team will never be efficient scoring the basketball until it has a true floor leader- I have to ask- why, after he hit his first six shots in the first quarter, did the Cavaliers not continue to relentlessly feed Z in the post? They went away from him in the second quarter, and never really came back. The guy is a match-up nightmare for the Celtics, if Kendrick Perkins even dreams of checking Z he needs to wake up and apologize... why just give him a taste, and then back off? It's confounding.

Aside from Z, the Cavaliers shot 17-of-61 from the field on Thursday, a cool 27.8 percent. Nuff said. Boston plays better perimeter defense than anyone else in the league, and we're seeing the results, in high-def.

Next: Game Three, Saturday night, 8:00, at the Q. And oh, do we need this one.