

Saturday's 97-92 loss in Atlanta was the Cavaliers' first in 24 days. It dropped their record to 20-4. It marked the end of an 11-game winning streak, tying a team record, and a stretch of 19 wins in 20 games. Saturday's game was the end of a four-in-five-nights stretch, without Zydrunas Ilgauskas or Daniel Gibson, yet the Cavs have yet to beat a quality opponent on the road. Erik Cassano gives his thoughts on the Cavs start in his latest piece.



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Saturday's game was the end of a four-in-five-nights stretch, without Zydrunas Ilgauskas or Daniel Gibson, against a quality opponent on the road. In short, they were bound to lose a game at some point, and if we were honest with ourselves as fans, we probably drew a mental circle around this game.

Yes, the Cavs have yet to beat a quality opponent on the road. You can look at it in one of two ways: Either they have yet to get that long-sought "statement" win on the road, or they're losing the games they had the highest probability of losing. Either way, obsessing over four losses while shrugging off 20 wins would amount to giving a gift horse a dental examination. This is still the best start in Cavs history.

But over the past week, without Gibson or Ilgauskas in the lineup, the Cavs have

been struggling to keep up their pace. The string of double-digit wins ended Wednesday in Philadelphia, when Z went to the bench with a sprained ankle. The rematch Friday in Cleveland was a comfortable 16-point win, but the Cavs only really outplayed the 76ers in the second quarter, winning it 27-14. The two teams more or less battled to a draw in the other three quarters.

Saturday, the vulnerabilities of the shorthanded Cavs finally resulted in a loss. Without Z, the Cavs were outrebounded and none of the Atlanta big men had to concern themselves with contesting jump shots out to 20 feet. Without Gibson to provide scoring off the bench, other players had to step up and provide an offensive spark alongside Mo Williams and LeBron James. To that end, Delonte West (5-for-19 from the field) and Wally Szczerbiak (0-for-5) didn't answer the bell.

Now, the games against Denver this week and Houston next week have sprouted red flags. If the Cavs can lose to the Hawks, they most certainly can lose on the road against the Nuggets, a first-place team that received a new lease on life when the Pistons dropped Chauncey Billups into their laps earlier this season. If the Rockets come to The Q with a healthy Tracy McGrady, Ron Artest and Yao Ming, they're going to pose a legitimate threat to hand the Cavs their first home loss of the year.

If the Cavs head into their Christmas Day contest with Washington as losers of three of their last five, not only will they start fading in Boston's rear view mirror in the race for the East's one-seed, the naysayers who are dismissing the Cavs' fast start as the product of growing fat on lottery teams will have some legitimate evidence to go along with their bellyaching. No Z, no Boobie, no difference, they'll say. Championship teams find ways to overcome adversity and win.

That's true. And if the Cavs start treading water, as opposed to building on their fast start, they will have let adversity start to get the best of them. But the good news is, this team still can find other ways to overcome adversity. And the first place Mike Brown might want to look is the starting lineup.

Brown is right to trust his bench players to step up in times of need. Anderson Varejao has moved into the starting lineup in lieu of Ilgauskas and performed admirably. But Andy in the starting lineup means a domino effect on the bench, as rookies Darnell Jackson and J.J. Hickson are pressed into service, helping to eat up the bench minutes that would normally go to Varejao.

Jackson and Hickson, as many rookie big men do, commit fouls at an alarming rate. Jackson committed two fouls in five minutes on Saturday. A third-grader could have calculated that Jackson would have fouled out in 15 minutes at that rate. Hickson committed one foul in three minutes, putting him on pace for a dismissal after 18 minutes.

Hickson and Jackson are not ready for big minutes, or meaningful minutes. Not less than two months into their rookie seasons. But as long as Varejao remains in the starting lineup, edging the rookies into the rotation will be a matter of necessity, not an option. And if Ben Wallace tweaks a back muscle, heaven help us all.

The other solution -- one that Brown might have to examine should Z's absence drag into the middle of next month -- is to move Varejao back to the bench, shift Wallace to the center spot, LeBron to power forward and start either Szczerbiak or Sasha Pavlovic at small forward.

Ideal? No. But it's a move that might fit the Cavs roster more naturally than starting Wallace and Varejao side-by-side.

Wallace was a center throughout his career until coming to the Cavs and moving to power forward so he could coexist with Z. Wallace knows how to play the center position, as long as he has some proficient scorers alongside him in the frontcourt. LeBron, at 6'-9" and 260 pounds, has a power forward's body. Playing a power forward's game might limit him to an extent, but his off-the-charts talent will allow him to take liberties playing virtually any position on the floor. He'll figure out a way to impact a game from the four-spot.

Inserting Wally at small forward might sacrifice some athleticism, but at 6'-6" and 240-odd, he can play the position and stretch defenses when his shot is falling. Same goes for Pavlovic, though he's a little smaller than Wally.

The argument here is that it's better to insert Wally or Sasha into the starting lineup, drawing on a position where the Cavs have real depth, instead of Brown starting his lone rotational bench big, leaving two rookies and Lorenzen Wright in reserve.

Any way Brown tries to mask it, the absences of Z and Boobie will be evident until they return. They're just that important. But dealing with adversity is all about

making the best out of what you have.

As long as the wins keep coming, Brown doesn't need to look at more drastic solutions. But while Saturday's loss in Atlanta was just the fourth in 24 games, it also might have been a warning sign.

The upcoming games against Denver and Houston will show us if the Cavs are approaching their first hardships of the season in the right manner. If they aren't, here's hoping that Brown is willing to make the necessary adjustments.