

## Rockets Grounded By Cavs 99-90

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Tuesday, December 23 2008 7:00 PM -

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The Houston Rockets have been a trouble team for the Cavaliers. Heading into last night's battle, the Rockets had won 6 of 8 overall against the Clevelanders, including 4 of the last 5 meetings at The Q, and 11 straight road games against Eastern Conference opponents. The Rockets are also one of the few teams who have gotten the best of Mike Brown; they were 4-2 against the young coach since he took over in 2005. King James and company were more than happy to buck some of those trends last night.



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### Synopsis

The Cavs and Rockets mostly traded baskets early on, and the Rockets did a good job keeping the Cavs from running. Daniel Gibson nailed a 3-pointer at the end of the first quarter to break a 23-all tie and give the Cavs a 26-23 advantage heading into the second.

As the second quarter began, a mini-run by the Rockets gave them a 30-28 lead over the home team. A bizarre set of events led to a defensive foul on Zydrunas Ilgauskas away from the ball, a technical foul on Ilgauskas, and an offensive foul

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on Yao Ming on the subsequent possession.

Yao and Ilgauskas were jostling each other a bit in the post, but it was nothing unusual, and the foul called on Ilgauskas was highly questionable at best. Z obviously took issue with the call, and a few choice words drew the ire of the referee. On the Rockets' next possession, Yao Ming got a little into it with Anderson Varejao as he jockeyed for position down low. The foul called on Ming was still iffy, but much more legitimate than the penalty charged to Ilgauskas (read: make up call). At any rate, the two clubs went into the half tied at 47, and the Cavs had a close home game on their hands; a rare occurrence thus far in the '08-'09 season.

An offensive foul on Yao Ming within the first minute of the third quarter gave Yao four fouls, forcing him to sit for the rest of the quarter. While Rafer Alston helped the Rockets get a slight lead with some ridiculous 3-pointers, Mo Williams set up LeBron James for a thunderous alley-oop that you're sure to see on SportCenter this morning. As FSN Ohio's video feed died for a few minutes (it figures that it happened as the Cavs were surging), the Cavs went on a 14-4 run to take a 71-64 lead which was capped by a nifty reverse layup by Anderson Varejao. LeBron James put an exclamation point on a 15-point quarter with a 3-pointer at the end of the period, giving the Cavs a 73-66 advantage heading into the fourth.

A pair of early buckets from Varejao and Ilgauskas gave the Cavs a 77-66 lead; their first double-digit lead of the game. Two Mo Williams jumpers (including one 3-pointer) gave the Cavs a 14-point lead with 10 minutes left. But the Rockets refused to fizzle. A 15-2 Houston run -- culminating with a couple of Yao Ming free throws -- pulled the Rockets within a point (86-85) with under 6:00 remaining. Daniel Gibson broke up the run with a much-needed trey. Gibson would add another 3-pointer about a minute later to make the Cleveland lead a healthy 7 with the game clock reading 3:18.

If those clutch bombs from Gibson were the body blows, an Anderson Varejao driving hook shot coupled with two LeBron James foul shots proved to be the knockout punch. By that point, the Cavs had opened up a 9-point lead which would ultimately be their margin of victory. LeBron James emphatically blocked a Yao Ming shot attempt from behind to fire up the crowd in the final seconds, and the Cavs improved to a sterling 24-4.

**Final: Cavs 99, Rockets 90**

## Quick Hits

**It's good to be the King.** 27 points, 9 boards 5 assists, 3 steals, 1 block. That's just another day at the office for 23. LeBron had 7 turnovers, which is especially worrisome when you consider that the Cavs had just 14 total. But in his defense, it's a little unfair to expect him to have to play in the fourth quarter of these games. In all seriousness though, LeBron James is the kind of star you want to have; the kind who only cares about winning. A small part of me has been worried that at some point LBJ was going to start dominating the ball more, like in past years. That hasn't been the case. The guy is unselfish to the max.

**Mirror, mirror, on the wall.** The Cavs and Rockets might have been separated at birth. Both teams have quality centers who are terrific shooters. (Yao and Z are both true centers, as the position is somewhat loosely applied to big men these days.) Both teams have a wing player capable of taking over the game at any time, although LeBron is certainly more potent at this point in his career than Tracy McGrady. And both teams emphasize defense. If you're looking for a team that's more similar to the Cavs than the Rockets, you'll be looking for a long time.

**A good test.** Not unlike the Nuggets, the Rockets are one of the handful of teams that always seem to give the Cavs fits. Not only that, but the Rockets also play a half court style that emphasizes defense; a style which really rears its head in the playoffs. After blowing out so many teams at home, it's good for the Cavaliers' collective psyche to know that they have the ability to win a game grinding things out without tons of easy points in transition.

**Western Conference dark horse?** Don't be surprised if the Rockets make some noise in the Western playoffs this season. If they can keep Yao, T-Mac, and Artest healthy, this is a team that could challenge the Lakers in a second or third round match up.

Sound far fetched? Consider this: Houston can limit the explosive Lakers' possessions by playing a half court game. Houston allows the fifth fewest points per game and holds opponents to less than 44-percent shooting. Yao Ming is one of the few centers who might be able to push Andrew Bynum around inside, and if Ron Artest hasn't bashed a fan in the head with a Gatorade cooler or quit to make another platinum album by April, he might be able to slow Kobe down enough to keep him from taking over the game. If Tracy McGrady is healthy and his back isn't being held together with duct tape and crazy glue, he's one of the best scorers in the game. A Rockets-over-Lakers upset is not entirely inconceivable.

**I don't like Rafer Alston.** Maybe it's the grumpy old man in me, but this former street baller has always rubbed me the wrong way. Alston's always willing to talk smack, and he doesn't really want to play defense, but I'm not sure those are good enough reasons to dislike the guy. Oh, now I remember: it's because he always torches the Cavs. Alston came into the game shooting about 38-percent both from the field and from deep, and he was averaging about 12 points per game. So, it makes sense that he blows up by shooting 8/11, 4/7 from beyond the arc, and dropping 20 points. Without Alston, the Rockets aren't in this game. Mike Brown needs to have someone playing inside of Alston's jersey from the opening tip when these two teams meet again at the end of February.

**Beyond the box score.** Yao Ming recording his fourth foul early in the second half was crucial to the Cavs opening a 7-point lead in the third quarter. Without Yao in the game, the Rockets took too many bad jump shots and had trouble keeping the Cavs off the glass on defense. Yao played less that 23 minutes in the game, and had he logged 6-8 minutes in the third quarter, the Cavs might have been handed their first home loss.

**It's how you finish.** Beyond the way he's totally changed the offense,

I've been very impressed with Mo Williams' ability to finish in transition. Williams might be the best open court finisher besides LeBron that we've seen on this team since James was drafted in 2003. Williams' body control is outstanding, he does a great job shielding defenders from the ball, and he plays much bigger than his 6' 1" stature.

**A big difference.** Going into the Houston game, the Cavs had the best point differential in the NBA, averaging 13.2 points per game better than their opponents. Boston is the only other team in the double-digits. Although they're scoring about 102 PPG, the Cavs are also holding opponents to about 89 PPG, and 42-percent shooting. If history has taught us anything, it's that defense wins in the NBA Playoffs, and if the Cavs can carry this defensive intensity into the postseason, they've got to like their chances.

**DiGiorno Pizza ® Austin Carr Quote of the Game.** *"Anderson playin' around, playin' around, time runnin' down...takes a nice walk through the tulips for a baby hook shot, and it's good, in The Q"*

...Tulips? Where does he come up with this stuff? Why not daffodils, daisies, or roses? What type of flowers would AC recommend giving to a young lady? So many questions -- Austin and I really need to split a DiGiorno, down a few beers, and straighten some of this out.

**Up Next: 12/25, Washington Wizards, Quicken Loans Arena, 8:00**

You know David Stern and friends thought this match up was pretty boss when they put it on the schedule. The Cavs have

booted the Wizards from the playoffs three years straight, there's bad blood between the Cavs and the Wizards, LeBron James is the game's biggest star, Gilbert Arenas is a lightning rod, and both teams should be competitive, right? Well, the Cavs have kept up their end of the bargain. The Wizards? Eh, not so much.

Washington has just 4 wins, and is duking it out with Oklahoma City and Minnesota in the race for the most ping pong balls. Coach Terrence Howard, *er*, Eddie Jordan has been canned. The Wiz are allowing over 102 points per game. And Gilbert Arenas hasn't even seen the floor, as he's still nursing his surgically repaired left knee. But DC's still got the White House going for it, which is nice...

After your family's finished carving up a Christmas ham, tune in to watch the Cavs carve up the Wizards.