

Time To Refocus

Written by {ga=samamico}

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The Cavaliers haven't looked horrible in their past three games, just completely average. When you consider how they started the season, and how fluid the offense looked and how effective the defense seemed to be, that's a bit of disappointment. At the same time, the Cavs have won two of those three games, and are still tied with Boston for least amount of losses in the Eastern Conference (5). They still have LeBron James and they still feature arguably the deepest roster in the league. Sam Amico takes stock of where the Cavs are at, 31 games into the season.



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But this is a "big picture" team -- meaning the Cavs aren't as focused on the here-and-now as they are on developing the mindset and strategy to win a championship in June. And they are indeed very close. The question is, are the Cavs the team we saw for the majority of the early part of the season, or the one that's seemed to lack chemistry and incentive during the past three games?

Here's a quick breakdown of what went right early, and what's gone wrong since the Christmas Day win over Washington:

* **The pick-and-pop.** Early in the season, Zyrdunas Ilgauskas and Mo Williams hooked up for a play that worked to near perfection. Z would set a pick on Williams' defender, slide to the wing or baseline, and Williams would pass to Z out of the double-team for a wide-open jumper. It resulted in some big nights for both players, as opposing defenses had to decide which one to contain. Well, the Heat chose Ilgauskas, deciding to keep a defender on him when he "popped." It appeared to confuse the entire offense and resulted in Z's two worst performances of the year, as he scored just 18 points in the two games combined. Don't think for a second that opposing scouts didn't notice that and quickly report it to their coaches.

* **Basic adjustments on offense.** When the Cavs went on those long winning streaks, they rarely had to adjust to other teams. They were a freewheeling bunch, with Williams driving, dishing and just making things happen. They flat-out couldn't be stopped -- regardless of what opposing defenses threw their way. But for some reason, the ball has just stopped moving. The bad news is, making adjustments has never been coach Mike Brown's strength when it comes to offense (even though he's not running the offense as much as assistant John Kuester). For instance, since Miami was overplaying Z on the pick-and-pop, why not surprise the defense by running a pick-and-roll a few times? Instead, the Cavs settled for way too many three-pointers -- something that's been an awful trend in the Brown era. That's not an indictment of Brown, but no team will ever win a title shooting 30 threes against a team like Miami, which has NO inside presence.

* **Delonte West and funk-mode.** When Delonte West looks happy, the Cavs win. Usually, he only looks happy at home. That's obviously not a scientific study, and it's not to say that West hasn't had some good road games. It's just that there are too many times when West gets into a little funk, almost like he has the basketball blues, and seems as if he's ON the court but not IN the game. West has struggled with depression, and this is by no means an attempt

to make fun of or make light of that fact. This is strictly related to his play -- which, for the most part, has been very good. But like so many other Cavs not named LeBron, West needs to get back to displaying the type of consistency he played with in November and early December. Recently, it hasn't been there.

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* **General chemistry.** West isn't the only one who's been up-and-down. After a fabulous start, Anderson Varejao has been completely average (and sometimes downright maddening) lately. Ilgauskas has worn the look of a man who has the holiday blahs, and Daniel Gibson has suddenly turned into little more than a streak shooter who refuses to penetrate, even when the long-range bombs aren't dropping. All of it may result in a trade -- as one Cavs front-office employee indicated recently that general manager Danny Ferry has always been enamored with Sacramento swingman John Salmons, and speculated that Ferry may try to land Salmons before the February trading deadline.

But tweaking the roster won't help if the Cavs don't figure out how to play like they did early in the season. It's not a matter of talent, just cohesion and desire. They had it once, and because of James, can still be good without those things on a regular basis. But 2009 isn't about "good" for the Cavs. It's about winning a title. Let's hope they can buckle down when it means the most and rediscover themselves. When that happens, we've already seen they are much more than the so-so team they've looked like lately.

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