

Cavs Hammer Hawks, Take 2-0 Lead

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Thursday, May 07 2009 7:00 PM -

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It isn't supposed to be this easy in the Playoffs. And it won't be this easy forever. But for now, the spring wars are an absolute milk run. And that isn't a bad thing. We'll take easy for as long as we can get it.

Return of the Killer D: It took a half of basketball for Cleveland's defense to round into form during Game One. Thursday night, it took a half of a quarter. The Hawks hit six of their first ten shot attempts in Game Two to forge a 12-12 tie at the midway point of the first period. Then the Cavaliers turned the screws. In the next two-and-a-half quarters of play, Atlanta went 12-of-44 from the field, a cool

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27 percent. Cleveland blocked 11 shots, forced 13 turnovers, and frazzled the Hawks into two technical fouls, one on Mike Bibby and the other on Josh Smith. It was easy to see why Atlanta was frustrated. The Cavaliers get a lot of leeway on defense. They reach, they grab, they bump; they play physical and get away with it. It's yet another sign that this team has arrived. Elite teams get respect from the officials, and the Cavaliers get plenty.

Viva Brazil: With LeBron content to play facilitator early on Thursday, it was left to the supporting cast to get things going for the Cavaliers, and the biggest go-getter early on was Anderson Varejao. The Brazilian heartthrob knocked in three of his first four attempts from the field, grabbed three rebounds, picked up a steal, drew an offensive foul, and found his big brother Zydrunas with a pretty interior pass for a lay-up, all in the first 7:17, on the way to a sparkling line of 12 points, eight rebounds, two assists, two steals, and a Nance-esque four blocked shots.

LeBron's Line: 27 points on 9-of-14 shooting, 3-of-5 from three-point range, and 6-of-12 from the line, with five assists, four steals, three rebounds and a blocked shot in just 31 minutes. The MVP struggled from the foul line, but the jump shot was on point, as he continually stepped back and ripped cord from mid-range and beyond. As he is wont to do, LeBron made greatness look routine on Thursday. He also made the two signature plays of the game, at the end of the first and second periods. To wit:

Play of the Night, Part I: With a 24-17 lead and the clock running down at the end of the first quarter, the Cavaliers dusted off their old staple- LeBron isolated at the top of the key, dribbling the clock down. Guarding LeBron for Atlanta was some guy named Solomon Jones, who, frankly, I didn't know existed before this series began. He didn't exactly make a name for himself on this play. With less than five seconds to go, LBJ roared right by the heretofore unknown Jones, pounded down an undefended lane, and [hammered home a reverse jam](#) at the 2.8 mark to send the crowd at the Q into spasms of delirium. It was now 26-17 Cavaliers, and although there were still three quarters left to play, the game, for all intents and purposes, was over.

Play of the Night, Part II: As spectacular as was his play at the end of the first period, LeBron topped himself at the end of the second. With time running out, the MVP took about five steps over the timeline, stepped back, and let fly from about forty feet out. I was at the game with my good friend Chad Zumock (talented comedian, check him out sometime.) Before LeBron crossed mid-court, Chad leaned over to me and said, "I guarantee you, he's going to make this."
[Swish!](#) Chad specializes in prophecies as well as jokes. It was 59-35, and there were no intents *or* purposes about it- the game was over.

Really, it isn't even fair.

He thought it was White-Boy Day (And it was): Not to get too sentimental, but it almost seems as if Wally Szczerbiak was destined to find his way into a Cavaliers uniform. He was a favorite in the State of Ohio back when he starred at the O.G. Miami, and was the peoples' choice to be taken by Cleveland in the first round of the 1999 Draft, before the Timberwolves grabbed him two spots ahead of the Cavaliers (who got a nice consolation prize in Andre Miller.) Nine years later, Wally finally landed in Cleveland as part of the big deadline deal in 2008. Even for a guy that had never suited up for the Wine & Gold, it was a quasi-homecoming.

Wally has been equal parts solid scorer, shaky defender, and comic relief since his arrival, but on Thursday, he was once again the one-man wrecking crew that brought the Artists Formerly Known as the Miami Redskins to the '99 Sweet Sixteen. Continually taking advantage of smaller Atlanta defenders, Wally put his arsenal of rec-league post moves and sweet strokes on display, bulling and shooting his way to 17 points on 7-of-9 shooting in 21 highly productive minutes. He even took part in a nice little role-reversal in the second quarter, [finishing a fast break with a dunk](#) off a no-look feed from LeBron James, who is normally on the receiving end of such passes.

And the fans at the Q, who were in no mood to be restrained anyway, poured out

their love to the well-coifed forward. On at least two separate occasions the crowd filled the festive air with chants of "WALLY! WALLY! WALLY!" The affection was entirely mutual. Flashing a smile like a split watermelon, Wally started his post-game interview with an impromptu shout, "I love you guys!" an exclamation that brought roars from the remaining fans.

Simply Red: Delonte West is this team's crazy glue, and on Thursday night he was crazy good. The character *with* character augmented his 14 points, three-rebound and two-assist effort with suffocating defense on the taller Joe Johnson, who shot just 5-of-15 and put up a game-worst -31. Late in the game Delonte took a shot to the eye from Zaza Pachulia (who else?) and had to leave the proceedings; preliminary reports indicate he'll be okay and ready to go for Saturday's Game Three. Let's hope that's the case, because this man is indispensable. Aside from LeBron, Delonte is Cleveland's best perimeter defender, and his chemistry with backcourt mate Mo Williams (15 points, five rebounds, five assists) is downright Cagney-and-Lacey.

Thoughts on the Love: This Cavaliers team is all about chemistry, and not just among the players. There is a communion between this team and the fans of Cleveland, a mutual affection that was on full display during Thursday night's rout. Late in the fourth period, with the game well in hand, the scoreboard video screen played the team's [parody of the "walk-in-freezer" Heineken commercial](#), and as the crowd cheered and the players laughed along, it seemed more like an extended family moment than simply a break in the action involving millionaire athletes and paying spectators. I know it sounds corny, but I don't care- I was in the building, and it really felt like we were all in this thing together, players and payers, enjoying life, basketball, and winning.

The natural comparison involving this team is with the 1995 Indians. Like that Indians team, these Cavaliers can never be counted out of a game. Like that Indians team, this Cavaliers team is expected to win every time out. But the feel between that team, this team, and the fans is different. The '95 Indians, excepting good guys like Sandy Alomar, were a standoffish group, even with the fans who adored them. And we did, indeed, adore them. But that adoration came from a

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dark place. Those Indians were our angry revenge, personified in Albert Belle's flexed bicep and Drew Carey's rallying cry, *"Now it's YOUR team that sucks!"*; They were our [Golem](#), a beast that delivered a punch with two generations of pent-up rage behind it. They were our collective F-You to a sporting world that had kicked us and laughed at us for way, way too long.

The love for this team is different. It comes from a happier place. The '95 Indians were the reversal of nightmares, gritted teeth and a clenched fist. The '09 Cavaliers are the fulfillers of dreams, an open smile and open hands for the embrace. We cheer for them, and they hear our cheers and return them. They're *f un*; we have fun rooting them on, and they have fun playing for us. We can't ask for a better group to represent us. They're everything that's great about sports; effort, teamwork, showmanship, and the sheer joy that comes with playing a kid's game and playing it the right way, with style and class. It would be an absolute honor to see this team bring the rain that washes away 45 years of Championship drought.

Oh, and about the Hawks: Well, they're in a spot of trouble, and not just because they're down 0-2. They're beat up. Marvin Williams and Al Horford spent Thursday evening in street clothes, and if things weren't bad enough, late in the third quarter Joe Johnson landed on Big Z's foot and came up hobbling. He left the game with a sprained ankle and may or may not be able to play on Saturday. Atlanta has had a nice year- first winning season and advancement in the Playoffs since 1999. But it's all going to end very soon.

Next: Game Three, Saturday night at 8:00, from Phillips Arena in Atlanta, Georgia. Like I said, I love this Cavaliers team. But I'd rather not see them back in Cleveland during this series.