

Celtics Snap 11 Game Losing Streak At The Q, Ruin Cavs Opener

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Tuesday, October 27 2009 7:00 PM -

Boston used the Orlando formula with rousing success on Tuesday night. The Celtics overcame an early 19-5 deficit, built a commanding second-half lead, and were just good enough to hang on from there to a 95-89 opening-night victory; their first in Cleveland since the 2004-05 season. The Cavaliers, meanwhile, looked all too familiar, even if the result didn't. They were disjointed offensively, weak defensively in the backcourt, and as a result they are 0-1, with as many home defeats as they sustained in the first 81 games last season. Jesse recaps the Cavs opening night loss to the Celtics.



The Cavaliers entered the festivities with the home-court advantage and sprinted out to a big early lead in front of a roaring sellout crowd at the Q. Then their visitors struck back with extreme prejudice, using dribble penetration, crisp ball movement and ridiculous outside shooting to destroy Cleveland's lead and turn it into a grim, frustrating and ultimately futile battle for survival. I'm not talking about the 2009 Eastern Conference Finals, of course.

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On to the bloody details:

Let it be remembered: That the first shot of the 2008-09 Cavaliers season was a ten-foot jumper at the end of the shot clock by Anderson Varejao, which he made. I don't know if that's a good omen or a bad one. It certainly wasn't a good omen on Tuesday.

Hot Start: The Cavaliers hit their first six shots as they sprinted out to an early 13-2 lead. Varejao had the hottest hand, hitting three in a row, all shots that he probably won't continue to hit regularly. As a matter of fact Varejao stopped hitting anything regular, going zero for his last six from the field. His team would shoot a Neme-like 23-of-64 the rest of the way en route to a 41.4 percentage for the game.

First of Many: LeBron claimed his first highlight-level block when he pinned Rajon Rondo's feeble dunk attempt with 3:08 left in the opening period. He had another on Ray Allen in the fourth quarter. I can't say LeBron was the problem tonight.

LeBron's Line: 38 points on 12-of-22 (10-of-13 from the line, 4-of-9 from three) with eight assists, four rebounds and four blocks in 45 minutes, a rate of usage that hopefully will not become a trend. LeBron did commit five of Cleveland's thirteen turnovers, but the guy has the ball in his hands every damn minute, he's going to make a few mistakes with it. He still doesn't go into the post enough, though.

Turnstiles! One of the big keys to Boston's big comeback was Cleveland guard Daniel "Boobie" Gibson. The Celtics went right at Gibson, first with Rondo, then Ray Allen, while climbing back into the game in the second period. Mo Williams wasn't playing much defense either, and nobody was hitting anything anyway. Cleveland's shooting cooled off late in the first period, went chilly early in the second, than went into a deepfreeze at the turn of the halves.

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It didn't help that Boston could not miss from deep in the first half. The Celtics hit five of their first six three-point attempts and 7-of-9, outscored the Cavaliers 30-17 in the second period and took a 51-45 halftime lead. It was Orlando all over again: penetrate against Cleveland's small, weak guards, move it around until the open man is found, and then- swish. Boston employed this strategy to the tune of a 61-33 run that transformed their 19-5 deficit into a 66-52 third quarter lead.

Less, not Mo: The box score says Maurice Williams was Cleveland's second-leading scorer with 12 points. They were a very quiet 12 points, and his -10 was the worst on the team, but don't worry, kids: there are a lot of bad teams in the National Basketball Association, and Mo can drop forty on any of them.

Unwanted Largesse: Even after falling behind by as many as fourteen in the second half, the Cavaliers had an abundance of chances to come back and win the game. Boston's offense went stagnant and sloppy, as it does, and the whistles were friendly as well: Cleveland shot fourteen free throws to Boston's one in the fourth period. It was right out there.

Yet the Cavaliers were never able to get within a basket of the tie or the lead. Continued poor shooting did them in, along with five fourth-quarter turnovers. James accounted for two of those turnovers with charging and palming violations as he tried to Earl Campbell his team back into the game. Boston deserves credit- they always play good defense and both Garnett and Pierce sank big shots to keep the Cavaliers at bay. But Cleveland had its chances.

Just a thought: We need Delonte West back on this team. He's the only guy we have other than LeBron who can break an opposing run by simply diving to the basket and getting free throws. He is a criminally underrated defender who will guard anyone, anywhere, anytime. His presence keeps Anthony Parker on the bench and lengthens the rotation. He is a smart player, a tough player, a clutch player, and we need him. We certainly needed him in this season opener.

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A Hard Assessment: We know a little about seasons of dreams that flame out on opening night (as opposed to the ones that flame out a little later in the process.) The Browns entered 1981 as a trendy Super Bowl pick, fresh off their Kardiak Kids run of the previous year. They kicked off an eagerly-awaited season at home on Monday Night against another AFC power, San Diego. Air Coryell went into the Muni and beat the Browns 44-14- running up around nine hundred yards in the process- and Cleveland spiraled to a 5-11 campaign.

I don't think this club is going to go the NBA equivalent of 5-11, which I'm guessing would be 30-52 or so. But we got an unpleasant measure of exposure on Tuesday night, one carried over from the end of last season. The Cavaliers still struggle defensively in the backcourt, still don't have great depth (ten points from the bench, which was outscored single-handedly by Rasheed Wallace), are slower than ever defending the pick-and-roll, the offense is still larded down with dribbling and upchucked jump shots, and LeBron still has to do every damn thing to win a game against a high-quality opponent.

The book is out on this basketball team. It's going to be a good team. But it's a very flawed team. We'll win our share of games around these parts, so don't start shaking your fists at the gods just yet. But I would generously call this the fourth-best team in basketball right now- generously- and that isn't good enough to get us where we want to go.

It can get better. If Delonte comes back, if Parker and Moon get comfortable, if Shaq and Z are healthy and productive, if Leon Powe finds a bionic leg before the Playoffs- this team can go a long way. Right now this is all we've got, and at least it's a fighting chance. Just stay with it.

Next: Wednesday night in Toronto, when what should be an improved Toronto Raptors team hosts the Cavs in a 7:00 tip-off.