

Six Points: Bobcats 94 Cavs 87

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The Cavaliers' three-game winning streak came to an end in Charlotte, as the Bobcats knocked them off by a seven-point margin. It was a frustrating loss because the Cavaliers played like they were hung over for almost three quarters, and when they finally flipped the switch late in the third they simply didn't have enough juice to finish their comeback. The game was also frustrating because things aren't getting any easier on Saturday, when the Dallas Mavericks roll into town sporting a 12-4 record. Nick Allburn checks in to recap the loss for our readers.



The Cavaliers' three-game winning streak came to an end in Charlotte, as the Bobcats knocked them off by a seven-point margin. Michael Jordan was present. No word yet on whether or not the guy next to him was a classmate who beat him in the third grade spelling bee.

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1. Credit the 'Cats.

While the Cavs are clearly the better club, the Bobcats have the most talented roster in their young history. The Cavs have owned the Bobcats over the years, and Jeff Phelps mentioned during the telecast that the Cavs had won 7 straight against Charlotte, and 16 of 19 games overall.

Last season alone, the Cavs beat the Bobcats by margins of 17, 20, and 30. It is unlikely that the Bobcats have forgotten about those thrashings, and they clearly wanted to exact some revenge tonight.

For about two and a half quarters, the Bobcats were much more focused than the Cavs. The Bobcats were playing better team defense, their shots were more disciplined, and they were making a concerted effort to push the Cavs in transition. It helped them build a 15-point lead heading into the half, which ballooned as high as 24 points in the third quarter. When the Cavs made their run late in the game, Charlotte's huge lead proved insurmountable.

Although the Cavs were far better at closing the door on mediocre teams last season, playing down to the level of a particular opponent has been a recurring theme of the LeBron James era. It's one thing to go out there, battle for 48 minutes, give a team your best shot and fall short, but to blow games due to mental lapses and lazy play is inexcusable, and those games add when playoff seeding becomes final in April.

2. Too many treys.

Lousy transition defense and poor shot selection are ultimately what cost the Cavs this game. The Cavs shot 28 threes - an absurd figure - and only converted 6 of them. That's roughly 21%, and I don't need to tell you that doesn't cut it.

One of the side effects of shooting so many threes was that the Cavs didn't make many trips to the free throw line. The Cavs only had 17 free throw attempts, and

they only made 9 of those, good for a paltry 53%. By comparison, the Bobcats went to the line 30 times, while only shooting 14 threes.

With Shaquille O'Neal back in the lineup, the Cavs should have bludgeoned the Bobcats inside. Between Shaq and Z on the inside, and James and Mo Williams on the outside, the Cavs could've had plenty of high percentage shots that would have likely ended in buckets or free throws. But unfortunately they squandered those opportunities. As a matter of fact, that's a good way to summarize the entire game: a missed opportunity.

3. Shaq is back (for now).

As I mentioned earlier, Shaq was back on the floor, having apparently recovered from his mysterious medical malady. Shaq looked pretty good, scoring 11 points on 11 shots and grabbing 8 rebounds.

It was a little surprising to see Shaq play a full 30 minutes on his first night back, which provides a convenient segue into my next point.

The Cavs are going to be walking a fine line all year with Shaq. They want to play him and integrate him into their system, but at the same time his body simply can't handle the grind of playing a full NBA season at a high level anymore. The Cavs are going to have to save their bullets when it comes to the Big Diesel, and so far, I'm pretty pleased with how they've handled him.

While chemistry is very important, having Shaq ready to go full bore come playoff time is the ultimate goal, and if that means resting him on the second game of back-to-backs, or giving him a full week off here or there, so be it. The Cavs will likely be sacrificing a handful of regular season games in exchange for a healthy Shaq come playoff time, and that reward is definitely worth the risk. We got a little dose of Shaq in high gear during the fourth quarter, and while he's no longer the

dominant center in the league, he's still better than the vast majority.

4. The art of roster construction.

We can't debate that this is the best roster that the Charlotte Bobcats have ever had. On the other hand, that's like saying William Hung's new single is his best ever; the inherent problem is that you're only comparing the new team to the garbage rosters that went a combined 144-266 during the franchise's first five seasons.

The 'Cats have some solid vets like Gerald Wallace, Stephen Jackson, and Tyson Chandler. There are some promising young players like Raymond Felton, D.J. Augustin, and Gerald Henderson. But like so many teams in the NBA, there seems to be confusion on whether this team is built to win now, or win later. How many players on Charlotte's roster are still going to be there in two years? How about in five years? Like so many teams, the Bobcats are stuck in limbo.

Charlotte's roster is talented enough to make the playoffs, and unless they get crushed by injuries, their talent level and Larry Brown's focus on defense will probably get them to the postseason. For a team that's been so awful since its inception, maybe that's enough. You have to crawl before you can walk, after all.

But so few teams have the guts to strip their rosters down to the bare bones, take their medicine for a few years, and emerge with a young core that's ready to grow up together. Oklahoma City is an example of a team that's been built the right way. Of course, having a budding superstar like Kevin Durant doesn't hurt either.

That's why I'm willing to give David Kahn up in a Minnesota a little credit. Sure the T-Wolves are one of the worst teams in the league, if not the very worst, but he seems to be building a young foundation of players while resisting the temptation

to augment the team with expensive veterans who will bring a short-term return. Then again, it looks like he may have botched the whole Ricky Rubio thing, so maybe I won't start canonizing the guy just yet.

5. Is Z finished?

I'm starting to wonder about Zydrunas Ilgauskas. His jump shot and his abilities as a "stretch" player are great, but dude, you're 7'3". Sooner or later, taking jumpers from a step inside the three-point line just doesn't cut it.

At 34, Z's also no spring chicken. Whether it's age, shot selection, a lack of minutes, or some combination of the three (most likely), Ilgauskas is only shooting 38% this year, and that number needs to at least be in the high 40s for a big man.

There aren't many players who play their whole careers with one team in professional sports, and so far Ilgauskas is one of them. When Z signed his extension with the Cavs in 2005, I was convinced that they were going to choke on it after two or three years. They haven't. Ilgauskas has been a model of consistency during the James era, and by all accounts, Z is the consummate professional. For those reasons, I don't want to trade Ilgauskas.

On the other hand, if you can move Ilgauskas' expiring contract at the deadline to improve your chances of winning a title and ultimately keeping LeBron James, you absolutely have to do it. Zydrunas Ilgauskas deserves to retire a Cavalier, but at the same time, LeBron James quite literally IS the franchise, and if you're Danny Ferry you have to do everything in your power to keep him. That might even mean trading a friend, and one of the franchise's all-time greats in Ilgauskas.

It will be very interesting to see how things play out with Ilgauskas. If Z continues to struggle, Ferry's choice might not be so difficult.

6.□ Getting defensive.

It's no secret that the Cavs' identity since Mike Brown took over has been defense, especially team defense. So far this season, the Cavs haven't been defending as consistently as they were last year. In fairness, there have been some issues with injuries in the front court, the uncertainty of Delonte West's status, and growing pains integrating new arrivals like Jamarion Moon, Anthony Parker, and of course, Shaq. But the fact remains that the defense hasn't been as bulletproof in '09-'10.

Last season, the Cavs allowed just 91.4 points per game (tops in the league), along with a 43.1% opponents' shooting percentage, and a 33.3% opponents' three-point percentage. This season, those numbers are 94.6, 44.2%, and 30.9%, respectively.

Obviously, we're dealing with a smaller sample size, and it's probably a safe assumption that the Cavs can improve their team defense as the season progresses. But it doesn't change the fact that the downgrade in their team defense from "great" to "good" has been one of the biggest contributing factors in their losses to mediocre teams like Toronto, Chicago, and Charlotte. If the Cavs want to once again capture that number one seed, the leaks on defense need to be sealed up quickly.

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