

Ilgaukas-Gate

Written by {ga=samamico}

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Everyone is in an uproar over the fact he failed to play Zydrunas Ilgauskas in Saturday's 111-95 win over Dallas, it may very well have been the Cavs' finest performance of the season. Truth is, they hammered a very good team ... without Z. But that didn't mean it was a good idea for Brown to ignore the big man who was supposed to be celebrating his biggest night of the season, and quite possibly the biggest of his career. Sam was at practice on Monday, and had a chance to talk to both Mike Brown and LeBron James about the controversial decision.



Mike Brown is the head coach of the Cavaliers and he has earned the right to determine who plays and for how long. Let's make sure we are perfectly clear about that.

As Brown said at Monday's practice, "I get paid good money from Dan (Gilbert)."

In other words, the Cavs' owner and braintrust have complete faith that Brown will make the right calls on the sidelines.

Besides, agree or disagree, Brown is the reigning NBA Coach of the Year. He led the Cavs to a franchise-best 66 wins last season, and the best overall record in the league.

And while everyone is in an uproar over the fact he failed to play Zydrunas Ilgauskas in Saturday's 111-95 win over Dallas, it may very well have been the Cavs' finest performance of the season. Truth is, they hammered a very good team ... without Z.

But that didn't mean it was a good idea for Brown to ignore the big man who was supposed to be celebrating his biggest night of the season, and quite possibly the biggest of his career.

As you know, Ilgauskas could have set the franchise record for games played, topping current GM Danny Ferry's mark of 723. As you know, Ilgauskas sat and waited ... and sat and waited some more ... for a moment that never came.

It was the first time anyone could remember that Ilgauskas didn't play for the sole reason that he was simply considered just not good enough. Or as Brown claimed after the game, because Z just didn't match up with Dallas' smaller, quicker frontcourt players.

OK, let's forget about the milestone for minute. Let's pretend it wasn't expected to be a historical, ultra-meaningful night for Ilgauskas and the organization as a whole.

Even then, Brown's line of logic is perplexing.

I mean, didn't Ilgauskas play against Toronto -- which also boasts a small, quick frontcourt? Didn't he play against Orlando -- despite the fact he's usually overmatched against Magic center Dwight Howard?

And didn't Ilgauskas spend countless hours of practice time defending former Cavalier big man Drew Gooden -- who started and played more than half the game for Dallas on Saturday?

Seriously? Ilgauskas couldn't guard ANYONE on the Mavs' roster? Come on, coach. It just doesn't add up.

Heck, as one sportswriter said when the final seconds ticked off the clock against Dallas, Z probably couldn't have done much worse than Mo Williams when it came to defending pint-sized Mavs guard J.J. Barea.

That's not meant to pick on Williams, who made all seven of his 3-pointers and played one of his best games in a Cavs uniform. Rather, it's to show that this really couldn't have been all about matchups, could it?

Now, I trust Brown. I don't think he had some sort of ulterior motive. I think he really believed that Z's presence on the floor may have hurt the team, or at least, assisted Dallas in some small way.

And who knows? Maybe the coach was right. I doubt it, but I'm not gonna sit here and tell you I know as much about coaching in the NBA as a guy who's been doing it for 10 years -- which includes a season assisting Gregg Popovich with the 2003 world champion San Antonio Spurs.

And again, the Cavs did play arguably their best game of the season against Dallas. So it's hard to find fault anywhere, especially with Brown.

THE KING SPEAKS

All of that said, you have to appreciate how LeBron James stood up for his teammate and friend at Monday's practice, implying that just beating Dallas wasn't the lone reason people came out to the game that night. Most people at the game, the players included, were expecting to honor a man who has been through it all. Both as an individual player and as a member of this once-miserable franchise.

"I definitely thought (Ilgauskas) should've played," James said.

"As a friend of his, I was very upset and I know he was, also."

LeBron continued.

"I'm not trying to stir up anything with coach or whatever is going on with the organization, but sometimes one game is the smaller thing," James said. "What was on the line was something way bigger than us playing the Mavericks. That was Z breaking the record."

James wasn't finished.

"He's been everything to this franchise and has given everything since he's been here," James said. "A lot of the guys that are here do not have the same history that I have with Z. They don't know what Z has been through.

"I don't think any of us would've been mad if Z started. He could've started, been subbed as soon as the game started and that would've given the fans a chance to give him a standing ovation. That's just the way I would've envisioned it."

James added he hadn't spoken to Ilgauskas about the matter but, "I think he knows I'm behind him in whatever he does. Me and Z are the only remaining two from when I was drafted. I stand behind whatever Z does because he's more than a teammate. He's a friend of mine and he's a big part in why this franchise turned around."

The Cavs' 24-year old superstar knows it, the fans seem to know it, and while Ferry hasn't commented, he likely knows it, too. And you can't help but wonder how Ferry feels about it, especially since he and Z played together with the Cavs

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and are close.

Obviously, the bottom line is the Cavs won the game. But even so, there was very little celebrating going on.

Hopefully, Brown understands that now and will do whatever it takes -- matchups be darned -- to get Z in the game Wednesday night against Phoenix.

After all, Brown may have earned the right to call the shots, but Ilgauskas has earned the right to stomp his huge footprint into the Cavs' record books. And he's one person who should never have to wait around to do it.

Sam Amico covers the Cavaliers and NBA for NBA.com, and is a regular contributor to SportsTime Ohio and The Cleveland Fan.