

The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}
Monday, December 14 2009 7:00 PM -

After a 2-2 week, with losses against the Grizzlies and the Rockets, a narrow win over Portland, and a double-digit win at Oklahoma City that wasn't quite the blowout the final score would have you believe, the Cavs stand at 17-7. When they are clicking, the Cavs can beat anybody in the league. When they play disinterested ball and don't bring it on defense ... well, that's when we write about 2-2 weeks. In the latest installment of his Tuesday column for us, John takes a look at The Good, The Bad, & The Summary of the last week of Cavs basketball. And also hits on the latest bit of Cavs news ... which could help keep LeBron in Cleveland.



Remember a month ago? It was an idealistic time.

A time when "Tiger plays 18 holes" referred to golf, rather than a particularly wild night at the Blue Martini.

A time when we (well, some of us, anyway) still believed that the 2009-10 Cavs season would be a continuation of the Cinderella 2008-09 season (until the clock struck midnight during the Orlando series).

Guess what? Those days are over.

After a 2-2 week, with losses against the Grizzlies (I know, *the Grizzlies*? But they actually have a good young team) and the Rockets, a narrow win over Portland, and a double-digit win at Oklahoma City that wasn't quite the blowout the final score would have you believe, the Cavs stand at 17-7. They're still up by five games in the Central Division, but that's academic; Milwaukee and Chicago do not have the horses to stay with the Cavs over 82 games.

But the Cavs are looking up at Boston, Orlando, and Atlanta in the conference standings, which means they're losing the all-important race for home court advantage.

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Bottom line is that it's not 2008 anymore. While the Cavs still have the talent to win many of their games by double digits, it's not happening as easily as it did last season.

Hopefully it will not matter much - they should still find their way to 60 or so wins and a high seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs - but this year's edition isn't quite the same as last year's.

Because last year was the most fun season in team history, it's hard not to feel just a little sad.

THE GOOD:

Let's Pay Some Attention To This 800 Pound Gorilla, Shall We?: After six-plus seasons of watching LeBron James night in and night out (*has it really been that long?*), it's easy to take him for granted.

He scores 30 points in a game - something that *never* happened to the Cavs before LeBron, save for a couple of Ricky Davis outbursts back in the day - and we don't even bat an eyelash.

FLASHBACK: Remember "Ricky's Renegades"? Those college kids who had seats behind the basket during the 2002-03 season, and painted their chests every night?

Whatever happened to them?

I assume they all graduated from college, entered the working world, and are now Assistant Associate Vice Presidents in whatever large companies they now call home.

In fact, we take LeBron for granted off the court as well. Other than a speeding ticket, LeBron has been squeaky clean. Name me one superstar who has NEVER been embroiled in any controversy away from the game.

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Can't be done.

(A month ago, I would have given you Tiger Woods.

I think it's safe to say that Tiger is out of the running now.)

LeBron has never been busted for a DUI, or had four baby mamas coming after him for child support, or shot himself in the leg at a nightclub.

(He's smart enough to have an entourage to drive him home and/or shoot him in the leg.)

He steps up to the plate and hits that ball for charity when needed, has become an ace at giving interviews, and always carries himself with class.

You could not create a better superstar than LeBron James.

I am as guilty as anyone of taking LeBron for granted; I don't mention him much in this space, simply because I could write "LeBron had another great week" almost every week of the season. But sometimes, he plays above even his lofty, future-Hall-of-Famer standards. And he reminds us that he can drag the rest of the team's asses out of any hole they may have dug themselves into.

Like last week.

LeBron averaged just a shade under 37 points per game last week, including two 40-point games (43 against Memphis, 44 against Oklahoma City). He pretty much saved the Portland and Oklahoma City games (during the latter, he had one of his patented series of three-point bombs, hitting three in a row late in the third quarter).

While his scoring has been down a touch this season, LeBron can still turn it on pretty much any time he wants to ... and it's a good thing he did last Friday, or it could have well been an 0-4 week.

Oh, About That Free Agency Thing: One of life's ironclad axioms is: *follow the money*. And for all of the talk about LeBron becoming a global icon, and that he needs to be based in a large media market in order to get there, it sure is interesting that a Chinese company is finalizing its purchase of a 15 percent stake of the Cavaliers.

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If you think they are doing that because they want to sell Mo Williams jerseys in Shanghai, think again.

And if you think they are putting that kind of cash into the Wine and Gold without some kind of assurance that LeBron will still be here past June ... then your birth certificate has the date "December 14, 2009" on it.

It's probably more fun for the national media to speculate about back-rooms deals and World Wide Wes and how LeBron is destined to play elsewhere in 2010. Meanwhile, the real story is unfolding right in front of everybody's eyes, yet nobody seems to want to pick up on it.

Follow the money.

We Have Room For More Than One Superman Here: Okay, LeBron wasn't the only Cavalier to save the week (if not more) with a strong performance against the Blazers.

Anderson Varejao notched 22 points (just a couple of baskets away from his career high of 26) and ten rebounds versus Portland.

He will never be a huge "numbers" player (he is averaging around eight points and eight rebounds per game, which is good, but it won't get you too many invitations to the All-Star Game), but the fact is, the team plays best when Varejao is on the floor. (Really. His raw plus/minus number - a rough statistic that simply measures how well the team plays with a player on the floor versus how well they play with him on the bench - is the best on the team.

Even ahead of some guy named LeBron.)

Frankly, Varejao's game pushes at the seams of practically every statistical failing the game has to offer. At least once a game, he back-taps a missed shot to a teammate. At least once a game, he takes a charge.

(Please, spare me the BS about how he "flops" all the time.

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He plays an international game, and if you don't like it, don't follow a sport that has gone global.

Even with all of the heightened referee scrutiny of "flopping" over the past couple of years, Varejao still draws tons of charges, so there has to be something more to it than merely falling to the floor.)

That, right there, is two extra possessions per game, yet not a bit of it ends up on his line of the boxscore.

We haven't even mentioned how he goes to the floor after loose balls, or gets inside the heads of opposing players, or how he is the Cavs big man who best gets the concept of defensive rotation.

Without him, this team is much, much worse off.

The Shot Of The Week: This one's easy - Mo Williams' [half-court bomb](#) with the shot clock running out against the Thunder.

Yes, it has the
wow!

factor of being a really difficult shot; and that alone gives it Shot of the Week consideration.

But more than being Just Some Really Long Shot, it broke the Thunder's backs.

They were within four points of the Cavs, with a little over four minutes to go, and were on the verge of getting the ball back.

And then Williams sank the shot, and
psssst!

All of the air was let out of the Thunder.

Williams' shot sparked an 11-2 run that ended the game.

Okay, It Wasn't Just The Shot: That 11-2 run also happened because the Cavs turned up their defense in the final moments of the Thunder game. The y held Oklahoma City to 13 points in the final quarter, and scoreless (except for a meaningless Nenad Krstic basket in the final seconds) for the final 7:17 of the game.

The Cavs forced the Thunder into taking several bad shots, boxed out for rebounds (Oklahoma City had only one offensive rebound during that stretch; otherwise, it was all "one and done" for them), and showed the defense that, when it is there, makes them one of the

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NBA's elite.

THE BAD:

Notice I Said *"When"*; It Is There: Yes, basketball is a game of momentum. Yes, if one team has a run, the other team will probably have its own run sooner or later.

That doesn't mean we have to like it when the Cavs are up by 16 points, blow the lead, and eventually lose the game. Especially when said blowing of lead occurs because they stop playing defense.

That's exactly what happened a week ago against Memphis, as they turned a 58-42 lead (late in the second quarter) into a 111-109 overtime loss.

As much as anything, the Cavs seemed to miss Jamario Moon in that game (he missed the contest with an injured groin). Moon would have helped greatly with perimeter defense on the Grizzlies' O.J. Mayo (28 points) and Rudy Gay (21). He would have also provided some support against the pick and roll play that Memphis executed an estimated 12,000 times in the second half.

(I love Shaquille O'Neal, but he was not put on this earth to defend the P&R.)

If Moon can slide over to bother Mike Conley on some of those drives, that play would have been a lot less effective.

But Jamario is just one player. The entire team seemed to lose interest in the second half of the game, and it showed.

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The Less Said, The Better: You'll notice I am not saying much about last Wednesday's game against Houston. Yes, there is a reason for that. Let's pretend that game never happened, okay?

Well, Just A Few More Words: One other reason for those losses: 20 turnovers per game. Yes, that's right; the Cavs gave the ball away 20 times to Memphis, and another 20 times to Houston.

If A Blood Vessel Pops In My Forehead And Nobody Is Around To Hear It, Does It Make A Sound?: With the passing of Sasha Pavlovic (no, he didn't die; but he is in Minnesota now, so his career did) and the corresponding demise of the **Sasha Pavlovic Factor**, this column is in need of another semi-regular feature.

And I think we have one.

Understand, there are three things in this life that make me truly angry, probably well out of proportion to the cause of the anger:

1. When I am caught behind a slow driver. I've learned a lot of patience over the years, but believe me, it all gets forgotten when I am behind somebody going 35 MPH on a one-lane 50 MPH road, or trapped behind the guy doing 60.1 MPH in the left-hand lane of a highway when the truck in the right-hand lane is going 60;

2. When I double down on 11 and draw an ace. Oh, does that burn me to no end. It's probably a good thing I haven't played blackjack in years; that decision alone has probably added years to my life;

3. Really stupid plays by the Cavaliers. (Once upon a time, this item would have read "really stupid plays by Cleveland sports teams" ... but I no longer care about the Indians, as professional baseball is a sport in which some teams can buy AK-47s, while others are allotted plastic sporks, and the league pretends it is a fair fight; and as for the Browns, stupid plays have become the norm.)

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The first two items really don't have much relevance to this column, but look at item number three! It mentions the Cavaliers! Hey, I think we have a new recurring feature!

So with that, we're going to award the first **Play of the Week That Made John's Head Explode** to **Jamario Moon**

The scene:

final minute of the Cavs-Blazers game.

The Blazers had just pulled to within four points thanks to a LaMarcus Aldridge three-pointer.

Moon took the ball out of bounds, and made the inbounds pass to ... nobody in particular.

Portland's Brandon Roy scooped up the loose ball and laid it in, and suddenly a seven-point lead with 15 seconds to go (which, in most cases, is pretty insurmountable) was a two-point lead with 12 seconds to go.

Fortunately, the Cavs held on for the victory, but Jamario came *this close* to earning himself some goat horns.

Write The Column While Watching *Monday Night Football*, And This Is What Happens: Every year, the NFL adds some "points of emphasis," rules infractions that they want the referees to pay close attention to.

I hope that next year, one of those points will be "penalizing defensive players for celebrating after making a stop for four yards."

Not for unsportsmanlike conduct, or for taunting, but simply for being jackasses.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

A very busy week, that's what lies ahead. The Cavs are at home against New Jersey tonight. (Not that I am trying to jinx anything here, but that one better be a "W", as New Jersey is 2-22 on the season.)

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Then they'll travel to Philadelphia to face the 76ers (much more fun to call them that than simply the "Sixers") tomorrow night.

(Not that I am trying to jinx anything here, but that one better be a "W" as well, as Philly is 5-18 on the season, and riding a 12-game losing streak as I type these words.)

After an
entire day

of rest, the Cavs will then be home to face Milwaukee on Friday evening.

And then it gets tricky - a Christmas week road trip that will take the Wine and Gold to Dallas on Sunday evening and Phoenix on Monday. Long-time Clevelanders may remember Peter Brown, who had a talk show on WKNR. (Whether they *want* to remember him may be a different story.)

Brown loved to antagonize the Cleveland fans, and one of his most common ways was by declaring a Guaranteed Win Night, in which he would "guarantee" that a team (almost always the non-Cleveland squad) would win a particular game.

I'm not about to call a Guaranteed Win Night for Phoenix next Monday - after all, I am a card-carrying Cavs Homer
TM

But I would guess that the record of teams playing the second night of a back-to-back, on the road, against a quality opponent, is not very good.

That being said, there's a reason they play the games, so let's check back with each other this time next week and see what happened.