

Eight Points: Cavs/Bucks

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Friday, December 18 2009 7:00 PM -

It was a game of runs for the Cavaliers as they both overcame a double-digit lead early, and blew a double-digit lead late. Ultimately they outlasted a mediocre Milwaukee Bucks team to improve to 20-7 and pick up a game on the Celtics, whose 11-game win streak ended Friday night. Even so, the game did nothing for the collective blood pressure of northeastern Ohio, as fans watched with horror as a 15-point fourth quarter lead melted away and left the Cavs with an 85-82 win that was far too close for comfort.



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1. How much Diesel is left in the tank?

Shaq played a very strong first quarter tonight, and although he's clearly lost a step, he can still be a top 5 center when he's on. This got me wondering, 'How much does Shaq really have left?'

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The answer will probably determine where the Cavs finish, at least in the Eastern playoffs. But from watching Shaq tonight, I get the feeling that if the playoffs started tomorrow, you'd be looking at a fairly healthy Shaquille O'Neal. Shaq is probably running at about 75-80% during these regular season games, and if he cranks up the dial all the way to 100 in the playoffs, I like the Cavs' chances against just about anyone except the Lakers, and we can worry about them if and when the Cavs get out of the East.

2. Preparing for the "new look" Cavs.

Talking about Shaq's future provides a convenient segue to looking ahead to 2010-2011. Assuming that LeBron stays in C-Town, this team is going to look much different simply by default. Zydrunas Ilgauskas will probably retire after this season, and whether or not Shaq retires, it's difficult for me to envision the Cavs bringing him back for the money that he'll likely command.

We'll see what kind of frontcourt solutions are available via trade and free agency, but I'd really like to see the Cavs do what they should have done from the moment they drafted LeBron James and make the full transition to a very up-tempo club. In LeBron, you have the most potent fast break weapon on the league, and he's vastly underutilized in that capacity due to the way the team has been constructed.

You don't need five great players to win when you have a superstar like LeBron, and I think a starting frontcourt of JJ Hickson and Anderson Varejao would be just fine. Williams and Parker could round out the starting five, while (fingers crossed extra hard) Delonte West is your sixth man, followed closely by guys like Jamario Moon and Daniel Gibson. The big question mark is whether or not you can fill out the frontcourt depth internally, and at this point we can't say with certainty whether Leon Powe will be totally healthy next season or Darnell Jackson will develop into a consistent contributor. Between now and next season, the Cavs have to address the frontcourt depth, and the answer(s) probably isn't currently wearing Wing & Gold.

3. Seeing red.

Was I the only one who was constantly confused by Milwaukee's red uniforms? I had to remind myself half a dozen times or so that the Cavs were not playing the Houston Rockets. I kept thinking, 'Wait, when did Houston trade for Michael Redd?' But I digress...

4. Third quarter Mo-mentum.

Mo Williams led a third quarter Cavaliers surge that ran contrary to the typical third quarter swoon that the Cavs often experience. Williams had 11 of the Cavs' 24 points in the quarter, as the Cavs tightened up their defense to hold the Bucks to just 12 points for the quarter. Although the margin eroded at the end of the game when the Cavs made only field goal in the final 6:35, it was that third quarter run that ultimately gave the Cavs enough of an edge to outlast the Bucks.

5. Re-releasing Delonte West into the wild.

Delonte delivered one of his better games so far this season with 12 points on 5-of-9 shooting. At this point it's all about baby steps for Delonte, but I like what I've seen in the last few weeks. Including tonight, Delonte has played 20-plus minutes in 8 out of the 10 December games that the Cavs have played so far. Considering that a few months ago Delonte's spot on the team wasn't a lock, this shows a ton of progress.

This year's Cavaliers are a team full of 'ifs' and 'maybes.' Can Shaq stay healthy all year? Will Mo Williams be effective in this year's playoffs? Whether or not the Cavs can count on Delonte is among the biggest questions. The Cavs don't need everything to fall into place to be a formidable playoff foe, but they need more hits than misses. If Delonte keeps making progress, that's one more crucial cog in the machine that you don't have to worry

about.

6.□□ The time to tinker is now.

I'm a Mike Brown supporter. For as much heat as the guy takes, he tends to deliver in the postseason, last year's conference finals notwithstanding. But I'm not entirely sold on Brown's approach to developing youngsters.

More than anything, young players need structure and consistent minutes to find a rhythm and start developing a routine. Still, we continue to see Danny Green and Darnell Jackson ride the pine night after night unless there's a blowout. After seeing how JJ Hickson has responded to his move into the starting five and how Shannon Brown has blossomed in Los Angeles when given minutes consistently, why give Green and Jackson a solid 5-10 minutes every night to see if the two can't develop into quality depth players? At least with Jackson, his minutes could ease the strain on Shaq and Z, which would probably be a prudent move.

7.□ Degree of difficulty.

The Cavs are 8-2 in December, with the only wins against over .500 teams coming against Oklahoma City, Phoenix, and Portland. One of the losses was an embarrassing defeat in Memphis. Yes, Memphis. We've seen the Cavs play down to the level of their competition before, and I'm worried that they're falling into that trap once again.

Things are going to get a little tougher for the Cavs as they round out 2009, with three of the next four games coming against the likes of Dallas, Phoenix, and the Lakers, by way of a nationally broadcast game on Christmas. The Cavs round out December with a home-and-home with the hard-charging Hawks. It will be interesting to see how the Cavs respond over the next two weeks.

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8. Two more peripherals.

Today's edition of "Random Celebrities at The Q" included Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman, Jane Seymour, who is best known for her role as the cougar wife of Christopher Walken in *Wedding Crashers*, and for annoying the living hell out of male football fans nationwide with her jewelry commercials during football games. It's bad enough that we have to grit our teeth through awful Kay, Jared, and Zales commercials for expensive rocks, but this broad wants to hawk some stupid design that allegedly was inspired by some cliché advice her mother gave her at age ten or whatever. No.

Thank. You

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And finally, tonight's State Farm Agent of the Game was Al Naylor. That's right, "Al Naylor." I really would consider switching to State Farm, but I'm pretty happy with my current agent, Mr. I.P. Freely. Naylor's name is funny in almost any context. For instance, if it's being read off a class roster by a third grade teacher, it's, "Naylor, Al." Alright, I think it's time to go.

Up next: 12/20, at Dallas Mavericks, 7:30