

Season's Beatings: Cavs Drub Lakers at Staples

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Friday, December 25 2009 7:00 PM -

Now, that's how you finish a road trip. The Cavaliers neatly tied a Christmas bow on a 3-1 Western swing, routing the Lakers, 102-87, in Staples Center. It was perhaps Cleveland's best overall performance of the season, as they performed smartly and precisely on offense and hammered the defending World Champions with a mailed fist on defense. The Cavaliers shattered the Lake Show's eleven-game home winning streak, sending the home team, and their fans, into a total meltdown in the process. Jesse Lamovsky recaps the exhilarating win.



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Cleveland is now 23-8 on the season and has really turned things around after an uninspiring several weeks of play. The Cavaliers were alternately dominant and clutch on the road trip, destroying Phoenix and Los Angeles and making all the big plays in their overtime win over Sacramento. There's still a long way to go- but right now, there's a lot to like about the way this team is playing the game.

First-Half Butt-Kicking: The Cavaliers started slow, falling behind 8-2, but from there they caught fire on both ends and dominated for most of the first half. Cleveland built a 23-19 lead at the end of the first quarter and then really took off, outscoring the Lake Show 24-8 to take a twenty-point lead at 47-27. After hitting

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four of their first five shot attempts, the Lakers went cold, shooting just 25 percent over the course of Cleveland's long, 45-18 run.

The Big X-Factor: Shaquille O'Neal has struggled for most of the season, particularly recently. Prior to Christmas Day the big guy had scored in single digits in four consecutive games. But playing the team that he led to three consecutive World Championships early in the decade, O'Neal looked revived. He got the Cavaliers going early with three dunks during the 11-2 run that gave Cleveland the lead for good midway through the first period. O'Neal finished the evening with 11 points and 7 rebounds and completely outplayed L.A. center Andrew Bynum, who had a church-mouse quiet four-point, six-rebound performance.

We'll Beat You Many Ways: For the first time in a long time, Mike Brown rolled out the Twin-Towers frontcourt of O'Neal and Zydrunas Ilgauskas, and the glacial twosome were very effective in establishing control of the paint for the Cavaliers early. Cleveland showed its versatility on the road trip, destroying the Suns with small-ball and thwarting the tall Lakers with a big lineup. Regardless of their inferior record to this point, I really think the Cavaliers are a better team this year than last year. They're bigger, they're deeper, and they're capable of giving opponents a lot of different looks.

Bench Strength: Instrumental in Cleveland's second-period success was the play of the bench. The Cavalier reserves outscored Los Angeles 17-6 with LeBron off the floor to start the quarter. Delonte West, Anderson Varejao and Jamario Moon combined for 29 points on 13-of-15 shooting, and while Big Z only hit 1-of-6, he chipped in with nine rebounds and a game-best +21. Cleveland's bench badly outplayed that of the Lake Show, outscoring the L.A. reserves 31-17.

Pre-Half Swoon: Unfortunately, Cleveland couldn't maintain its dominance all the way to the halftime buzzer. Attacking the basket and getting to the free throw line- the Lake Show had nine shots from the stripe in the final two-and-a-half minutes of the half- Los Angeles finally found its sea legs with a 15-4 run and trailed by just nine, 51-42, at halftime.

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Just a Long Out: Cleveland was within an eyelash of being up by twelve instead of nine at half thanks to a remarkable shot by LeBron James. Taking a feed from J.J. Hickson, LeBron threw up a running half-court shot at the buzzer that found nothing but the bottom of the net. Unfortunately, the ball didn't leave LeBron's hand until just after the clock struck zero and the shot was, correctly, waved off.

Third-Quarter Revival: With the way the second period concluded, there was concern- at least on my part- that the Lake Show momentum would continue into the third. At first those concerns seemed founded, as L.A. sliced its deficit to six at 54-48. Then the Cavaliers tightened the screws again. Utilizing a physical brand of defense, Cleveland hounded the Lakers, blocking their shots; slamming them to the floor and frustrating the home team into two technical fouls during a 22-8 run that put the Cavaliers back in front by twenty, 76-56. Cleveland ended the period with a 76-59 lead, their troubles at the end of the first half a distant memory. So too were the Lake Show's chances of winning.

Looked Like a Browns Game: Los Angeles spent much of the game carping at the officials, and late in the fourth quarter, with the issue long decided, the home team- and its normally sedate fans- simply melted down. Cleveland was leading 93-73 with four minutes left when Jamario Moon was fouled by Kobe Bryant. Chirping at Mo Williams, Lamar Odom drew his second technical foul and was ejected from the game. Phil Jackson was then hit with a technical on a delay-of-game violation. At that point, the roguish element in the Staples Center crowd began throwing objects- foam fingers and water bottles- onto the floor. It was an all-encompassing loss of composure that afflicted the Lakers, their coaches and their fans. It was beautiful.

Actually, I'm a little bit impressed with the display of pique shown by the Lake Show fans. I didn't know they had it in them.

LeBron's Line: 26 points on 9-of-19 from the field, 2-of-7 from three-point range and 6-of-11 from the line with nine assists, four rebounds, two steals and a blocked shot. LeBron didn't shoot the ball particularly well and he did commit

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seven turnovers, but by and large he played a focused, composed game- more so than his fellow MVP puppet Kobe Bryant. He also did good work down in the post against Ron Artest. More and more we've seen LeBron on the block- which is good, because he's almost unstoppable as a scorer and passer down there.

Kobe's Line: 35 points, 9 nine rebounds, eight assists and two steals on 11-of-32 from the field, 1-of-3 from three-point range and 12-of-12 from the line. Kobe had the edge on LeBron in the major statistics, but he did not play well- his shot was way off, he never made that patented fourth-quarter push he's so well-known for, and, bothered by the in-your-face defense of Anthony Parker and Jamarion Moon, he spent much of the evening alternately glaring at or complaining at the officials. His team followed his petulant lead: L.A. was whistled for five technical fouls during the game.

No Support: Kobe struggled all evening, and he didn't get much help from his brothers in Forum Blue & Gold- especially in L.A.'s vaunted frontcourt. Pau Gasol, Andrew Bynum and Lamar Odom combined for just 21 points on 8-of-20 shooting. It was a welcome change from the two games between the teams last year, when the Lake Show slaughtered the Cavaliers in the paint.

Mo-Ney Man: Mo Williams was a critical performer throughout this road trip, and he once again came up large for the Cavaliers on Christmas Day. The sharpshooter led the Cavaliers with 28 points, knocking down all three of his three-point attempts and adding seven assists and six rebounds. He owned L.A. point guard Derek Fisher, repeatedly shooting right over him on the post. Mo was also a gadfly, jabbering Lamar Odom into an ejection and frustrating Fisher into a dirty foul late in the fourth quarter, an elbow shot that had LeBron right up in Fisher's face.

An All-Around Great Night: Cleveland dominated the Lake Show on both ends of the floor; the Cavaliers shot 54.3 percent and dished out 24 assists, while Los Angeles bricked away at a 36.5 percent clip. The 87 points scored by the Lake Show was their third-lowest output of the season. Cleveland also had seven

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steals, seven blocked shots, and forced 14 turnovers. Other than 16 turnovers of their own, the Cavaliers did very little wrong on this day.

Shot of the Night: Jamarion Moon had perhaps his best game of the season with 13 points on 6-of-7 shooting along with excellent defense on Kobe Bryant, and it was his circus shot that really put the game on ice in the fourth quarter. With 5:22 to play, Cleveland leading 86-73 and the shot clock running out, Moon took a feed from Zydrunas Ilgauskas and banked in a contested three-pointer just ahead of the buzzer. It was just that kind of night for the Cavaliers, and for Jamarion Moon.

Next: Sunday night at 6:00, when the Cavaliers return home to entertain the always-tough Houston Rockets.