

Cavs Return Home In Style, Rout Rockets

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Sunday, December 27 2009 7:00 PM -

Sunday night's meeting with the visiting Houston Rockets at the Q had "Trap" written all over it. And for the first few minutes of Sunday's game the Cavaliers were flat. They spotted Houston an early twelve-point lead and were noticeably less active than the Rockets and their water bug of a point guard, Aaron Brooks. But it didn't take long for Cleveland to flex its newfound muscle. The Cavaliers ate up Houston's lead and then exploded early in the second half on the way to a decisive 108-83 victory. Jesse recaps the win.



Sunday night's meeting with the visiting Houston Rockets at the Q had "Trap" written all over it. The first game back from a long road trip always seems to be tough, and so too do the tenacious Rockets, who had beaten Cleveland in four of the previous five meetings between the two teams. Coming off their emotional Christmas Day win in Los Angeles, the Cavaliers could be forgiven for coming out a little flat against Rick Adelman's team, which was fresh off a tight victory in New Jersey the previous night.

And for the first few minutes of Sunday's game the Cavaliers were flat. They spotted Houston an early twelve-point lead and were noticeably less active than the Rockets and their water bug of a point guard, Aaron Brooks. But it didn't take long for Cleveland to flex its newfound muscle. The Cavaliers ate up Houston's lead and then exploded early in the second half on the way to a decisive 108-83 victory. The win extended Cleveland's home-court winning streak to ten and its overall winning streak to four, each of the latter over tough Western competition.

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The Cavaliers have picked an opportune time to play their best basketball of the season. But there are miles to go before they sleep- a home-and-home against the powerful young Hawks lies between this team and the curtain on 2009.

Cold Start: Back home after a week in the balmy West, the Cavaliers started out as chilly as the freezing weather outside Quicken Loans Arena. Cleveland missed nine of its first eleven attempts from the floor, including six straight duffs at one point. Meanwhile, Houston was hot; the Rockets ripped cord on six of their first eight attempts and sprinted to a 16-4 lead five minutes into the game. The smallest Rocket, six-foot Aaron Brooks, was the biggest bugaboo, as he netted seven in the opening burst on the way to 18 first-half points.

The Big Jumper Cable: Much as they did on Christmas against the Lake Show, the Cavaliers got back into the game by feeding the ball to Shaquille O'Neal. Taking advantage of his huge height and strength superiority over bantam-sized Houston center Chuck Hayes, Shaq got position and converted with a pair of free throws and a lay-up, then took further advantage of the extra attention of the Rocket defense with a feed to LeBron James for a driving lay-up. The big man was on his way to a very productive night: 13 points, 11 rebounds and 4 assists in just over 22 minutes.

Making Them Feel Us: While Shaq established himself on the low block, the Cavaliers were establishing themselves on the defensive side. After jumping out to that twelve-point lead the Rockets missed eleven in a row from the field, an icy streak that enabled Cleveland to pull ahead late in the first period, 20-17. Houston pulled even on five occasions during the first half, but they would never lead again for the remainder of the game.

The Bombardment Begins: The Cavaliers entered the night second in the NBA in three-point shooting percentage at 42.2 percent, just a tick below Phoenix's 42.5. You wouldn't have known it by the way they began Sunday's game, though. Cleveland clanked, rimmed out or otherwise missed its first eight attempts from downtown. Indeed, the Cavaliers didn't hit a three-pointer until the very end of the

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first half- but it was a big one and a harbinger of good shots to come. After four Aaron Brooks free throws- three from a foul on a triple attempt and one more on a Delonte West technical- tied it at 48-apiece, Mo Williams got free and found twine from downtown at the halftime buzzer to make it 51-48. The three-fueled run that got it done was underway.

The Bombardment Continues: Having gotten hot from outside just before the break, Cleveland stayed hot as the second half commenced. After LeBron nailed a gorgeous running jumper at the shot-clock horn, he followed with back-to-back three-pointers to answer an Aaron Brooks three and make it 59-51. After Brooks hit another shot, Mo Williams drilled a three-pointer, then another, then another and suddenly, with 7:46 to go in the third period, it was a fifteen-point game at 68-53.

Following a Shaquille O'Neal lay-up the Cavaliers decided to get their three-pointers the old-fashioned way. First LeBron got a hoop and harm off a pretty behind-the-back feed from O'Neal, then Mo got his own lay-up with the foul. When the dust settled at 5:31 of the third, it was 76-57 Cavaliers, and as Chick Hearn would say, this one was in the refrigerator. In six-and-a-half minutes spanning the end of the second quarter and the first half of the third, Cleveland hit 10-of-15 shots- including eight three-point plays of the long-shot or "and-one" variety- and outscored Houston 28-9.

Defense Never Rests: While the Cavaliers were shooting the Rockets out of the game on one end, their defense was keeping them out of it on the other. Houston shot a bone-chilling 32.9 percent for the evening- 29 percent following that opening salvo- and committed 16 turnovers. After racking up 18 points in the first half, Aaron Brooks tallied just five in the second, including none in the final 21 minutes of action. Trevor Ariza, who had lit up the Cavaliers for 26 in the first meeting between the teams in early December, scored a quiet eleven on 2-of-10 shooting Sunday. Houston's 83 points was its lowest output of the season.

LeBron's Line: 29 points on 12-of-20 from the field, 2-of-5 from downtown and

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3-of-4 from the line with six assists, five rebounds, three steals and a block in just 29 minutes of work. Facing perhaps the league's best individual defender in Shane Battier, LeBron varied his game brilliantly, working the post in the first half then taking Battier outside in the second. Most impressively, he committed just one turnover. It's the best I've ever seen him perform against Battier- a player who normally gives him fits. With the game safely in hand LeBron spent the fourth quarter in his warm-ups, cracking jokes, flashing the gooseneck sign and performing the dance moves that so infuriate opposing players and fans.

As Mo Goes: The Mississippi marksman got hot out West and stayed hot in the return home, hitting for 20 points on 7-of-13 from the field and 4-of-6 from downtown. It was the fourth straight game Mo sprung for twenty-plus; not coincidentally, the Cavaliers were winners in all four games. Indeed, Cleveland is now 11-2 when Mo goes over the twenty-point mark.

Size Matters: The Cavaliers enjoyed a huge size advantage over the Rockets and took full advantage, pounding Houston on the glass, 53-37 and winning the points-in-the-paint battle by a whopping 52-16. Their two-headed center combination of Shaquille O'Neal and Zydrunas Ilgauskas combined for 25 points and 16 rebounds in 39 minutes. Add up the domination inside and outside and it equals the biggest win over the Rockets since a 100-70 thrashing way back on January 6th, 1998. (Big Z went for eight points and seven rebounds in that one, just in case you were wondering.)

Next: Tuesday night at 7:00, when the Cavaliers try and stay hot in the Peachtree City against the Hawks.