

The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}
Monday, December 28 2009 7:00 PM -

They're elite again. Well, that's what the national media would have you believe about the Cavaliers. That they were a sort-of elite team heading into the season, then dropped off the face of the earth after a terrrrrible 3-3 start. But the Cavs have now won their last four games and nine of their last ten. Anyway, the Cavs' hot streak - and particularly that trouncing of the Lakers - has several of the national commentators saying that the Cavs are back in the title picture. We'll let them believe that they are "back" ... but in truth, they never really left. John Hnat gives us The Good, The Bad, & The Summary of what was a great week of Cavaliers basketball.



THE SUMMARY:

They're elite again.

Well, that's what the national media would have you believe about the Cavaliers. That they were a sort-of elite team heading into the season, then dropped off the face of the earth after a *terrrrrible* 3-3 start.

But the Cavs have now won their last four games and nine of their last ten. This past week, they finished a West Coast road trip by beating Sacramento (a 117-104 overtime win; yes, they did win by 13 points in a game that went to overtime, thanks to pitching a shutout in the extra session) and the L.A. Lakers (a 102-87 dismantling on Christmas Day), then came home to pound Houston (a 108-83 pasting of the Rockets).

Presently, the Wine and Gold stands at 24-8 on the season. They now sport a ten-game lead over Milwaukee in the Central Division ... remember when the Bucks were neck and neck with the Cavs? (That would be like a

horse having a nose on

[Secretariat](#)

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two seconds out of the gate.

Soon enough, they'll be back ten lengths where they belong.)

More importantly, they are mere percentage points behind Boston for the best record in the Eastern Conference, and the home court advantage that goes with it.

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THE GOOD:

The Obvious: LeBron James. Eastern Conference Player of the Week for the umpteenth time in his career. And he only had to average 30 points per game (including a huge triple-double in the overtime win at Sacramento) to do it.

Yawn.

The 38-Game Season: I hate to ever sound like I'm talking down (*well, except when it's deserved*), but I have to here. Not to you personally; I am sure that what I am about to say doesn't apply to you.

Instead, this message is targeted at the subset of Cavs fans who do not understand why Shaquille O'Neal is on this team.

The type of fans who say "trade Shaq and get somebody else who fits in with this team."

They mean well, really they do. But they are missing the point.

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Shaquille O'Neal is not a Cavalier because of what he can do during the regular season (for the most part). The Cavs traded for him for a season that will last up to 38 games. Specifically:

- The four regular-season games against the Celtics;
- The four regular-season games against the Magic;
- The two regular-season games against the Lakers;
- The 28 games (potentially, if every series goes to its seven-game maximum) that they will play in the playoffs.

That's it. Shaq is not here to win a meaningless game against Memphis in December. You don't bring in Michael Symon to cook Chicken McNuggets.

Against the Lakers, Shaq showed exactly what he can do. Not so much from a boxscore standpoint - the final numbers showed that he posted a respectable, but hardly earth-shattering, 11 points and seven rebounds.

Wait a minute, I take that back. The boxscore does show exactly what Shaq can do. You just need to cross to the Lakers side of the ledger.

Do that, and you'll find that the Lakers' talented big men - Andrew Bynum and Pau Gasol - were held to a total of 15 points between them.

That, right there, is what Cavs GM Danny Ferry had in mind when he traded for The Big Whatever He's Calling Himself This Week. Shaq is not here to be a scorer; they have LeBron and Mo Williams for that. It's 2009, not 1998. What he does do is neutralize the opposing big men, particularly for the other elite teams (particularly Bynum, Gasol, and Orlando's Dwight Howard).

We saw this earlier in the season against Orlando, when Shaq drew several quick fouls from Howard and forced him to the bench.

We saw it again against the Lakers.

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One other thing Shaq brings: he is not afraid to make his fouls count. One of the critical junctures in the Lakers game came in the second quarter, with the Cavs leading 35-21.

The Cavs had pretty much taken the Staples Center crowd out of the game, and the last thing they needed was for the Lakers to swing the momentum back in their favor.

Kobe Bryant was about to do just that, as he approached the rim for what would have been a ferocious, bring-the-fans-to-their-feet dunk ... and Shaq crashed into the Black Mamba (which is the coolest nickname in the game, incidentally).

No dunk, no shift in momentum, just a couple of ho-hum free throw attempts.

And The Record Shows It: Last year, the knock against the Cavaliers was that they could not beat the better teams in the league. *Sure, the conventional wisdom held, you can roll up the Golden States and Indianas of the league; but put Orlando or Boston on the other side of the court, and the Cavs will fold up like a five-dollar hooker in a cheap lawn chair*

(The conventional wisdom sometimes mixes its metaphors.)

Anyway, whether it is because of the presence of O'Neal, or the additions of Jamario Moon and Anthony Parker, or simply the waxing moon, the Cavs are a much better team against the league's top dogs. They are 6-2 against opponents sporting a .600 or better winning percentage. Four of those six wins have been by double digits. Three of those wins have been on the road (against Orlando, Phoenix, and the Lakers; by the way, those teams are a combined 40-5 on their home hardwood, not counting the games against the Cavs).

Those numbers are off the hook.

Play .750 ball against the best teams in the league, and the headlines in late June will look something like "The Cavs:

Can They Repeat in 2010-11?"

Z (As In, Rhymes With Three): In case you missed it, the win at Sacramento was sparked by

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three consecutive three-pointers by Zydrunas Ilgauskas, all of them from the same spot on the right wing.

I wish I had one of those shot-selection charts in front of me to prove this thought, but Z should not be shooting from beyond the arc anywhere near the top of the key. Have him facing the hoop, and his shots go
clang!
into the night.

Put him on a wing though, and he turns into a seven-foot-three Kyle Korver.

It's definitely an Island of Misfit Toys skill set - the tallest guy on the team being able to launch three-pointers - but give Z credit for developing it.

(And give Coach Mike Brown credit for recognizing it and for using it.)

The First Rule Of The Cavaliers: I've said it before, and have no problems with being repetitive or redundant, so here it is again: *as Mo Williams goes, so go the Cavaliers*
.

When he is on his game, it is near impossible to beat the Wine and Gold.

He provides that extremely critical second scoring threat, that other guy who opposing defenses need to take seriously.

This past week, Mo scored 27, 28, and 20 points in the Cavs' three games.

This past week, the Cavs won all three of their games.

It is not a coincidence.

Play Of The Week: We have quite a few candidates this week, but the winner has to be Moon's

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[alley-oop dunk](#) against the Rockets. Granted, he almost took out two guys (including a teammate) in the process; but if you want an omelet, you've got to break some eggs.

THE REALLY, REALLY GOOD:

Those Foam Fingers Don't Pack Much Of A Wallop. Really.: For all the grief we've taken as Cleveland fans over the years - think of Sam Wyche's ["you don't live in Cleveland"](#) tirade on the sidelines back in the 1980s, or more recently the [Bottlegate](#) game that gave the city a black eye ... come on, admit it, you were at least a tiny bit glad that the Lakers' fans started throwing objects onto the court in the fourth quarter.

Yes, a bunch of Los Angelenos were irate enough to do something in the fourth quarter other than leave the game early!

But what did the Lakers' fans throw onto the court? *A bunch of foam fingers.* The foam fingers were apparently given to fans attending the game.

(Guess they won't be having any Bobblehead Nights at the Staples center anytime soon.)

What a bunch of rookies.

Try throwing foam objects in C-Town, and you'll be laughed all the way into Lake Erie.

If we Clevelanders were in the Staples Center, we would have found a way to smuggle in bottles, batteries, dog bones, grenades, and plenty of other objects that would normally be caught by the Transportation and Safety Auth ... whoops, bad example.

Point is, when

we

throw junk onto the playing field, it is damn well going to be something that will be

felt

.

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If you're gonna do it, do it right.

I just made the point of how bad-ass we are by quoting a line from probably the most sissified band of the past quarter-century. I am going to bail out now.

THE BAD:

You have got to be kidding me. The Cavs are this hot, and on the verge of gaining the best record in the conference, and you want me to say something bad about them?

For real?

I do have to be fair here. So at the very real risk of extending this column to its appropriate length, let's say a few words about our favorite whipping boy ...

The New Free Space On The Bingo Card: ... J.J. Hickson. Although raw plus-minus numbers have their limits, they tell quite a story on J.J. this week.

Consider these two numbers:

- In three games this week, the Cavs outscored their opponents by a total of 53 points.
- In those three games, Hickson's combined plus/minus was *minus 13*.

Nobody else on the team (at least, nobody who got Real Playing Time) was even close.

As Cavs fans, we all want Hickson to develop into a useful player. We come not to bury J.J. But we sure as hell can't come to praise him either, not at this point.

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The real concern for us as Cavs fans is that J.J. is not showing signs of development. I sure hope he is a beast in practice, and that it is simply a matter of time before it spills over to actual live games.

But he is approaching Drew Gooden's single-season team record of 182 passes fumbled out of bounds.

(
Yes, I made up that statistic just now.

I would not doubt the number or the record holder, however.
)

He's also threatening Gooden's mark of 26 blood vessels burst in Coach Brown's forehead as a result of missed defensive assignments.

(
Ditto.
)

And aside from put-backs and dunks when a double-teamed LeBron finds him with a pass, he has no offensive game.

(
At least Gooden could hit a jumper pretty reliably.
)

But J.J. serves two very important purposes. One, as previously mentioned, he gives me a reason to fill up more column space. (Personally, that's the one I care about.)
Two, he is the Official Placeholder at Power Forward.

We have another six weeks or so of living with J.J. in the starting lineup, and then he'll be wearing a suit for the remainder of the season.

Which brings me to my next point ...

A SHORT COMMENTARY ON DEADLINE TRADES:

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If the Cavs make one, it'll be for a power forward.

And no, they are not going to trade Shaq. And unless they have a pretty much ironclad "we'll see you in 30 days after your new team releases you" arrangement with Ilgauskas, there is no way that Z will be dealt either.

When February rolls around, don't be surprised if the Cavs stand pat. In a very real sense, Ferry made his deadline move last summer, when he signed Leon Powe to a two-year deal.

At the time, Powe was just a couple of months removed from the nasty knee injury he suffered in last year's playoffs (while a member of the Celtics).

The timetable for Powe's return has consistently placed his return as happening ... sometime in February, right around the deadline.

Unless Washington suddenly decides to make Antawn Jamison available for nothing but salary cap relief in return (repeat after me, you readers who happen to be the Wizards GM: *you want to trade Jamison for Wally Szczerbiak ... you want to trade Jamison for Wally Szczerbiak ... you are getting very sleepy*

), and as long as his recovery continues on track, Powe is the likely starting forward for this team down the stretch and into the playoffs.

Coach Brown will probably lift out Hickson, install Powe in his place, and keep Anderson Varejao as the primary backup, where he seems to do best.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

Woo hoo! A pair of back-to-backs this week!

One of them will be tough (a home-and-away set with Atlanta tonight and tomorrow; the Hawks, at 21-8, have become one of the tougher teams in the Eastern Conference). The other one ... won't (a weekend set of games at New Jersey and then home against Charlotte).

Which is good, because the West Coast Swing, Part II is looming in the following weeks.