

## Eight Points: Cavs/Nets

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Saturday, January 02 2010 7:00 PM -

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It might just be a convenient excuse, but it sure looked like the Cavs were a little groggy for the 1:00 PM start for Saturday afternoon's game in New Jersey against the Nets. To be honest, it would be easy for fans who were still a little groggy after the Buckeyes' victory last night to doze off during this one, because it wasn't particularly eventful. After sleepwalking through the first quarter, the Cavs took a one-point lead into the half which they never relinquished. A strong defensive effort in the third quarter helped the Cavs stretch their lead to eight points, and that would prove to be their final margin of victory. Nick Allburn recaps the win.



### 1. An afternoon nap.

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Although it wasn't the Cavaliers' most memorable win, it was an important one. Lately the Cavs have done a better job winning the games that they should win, and it's helped them build a seven-game winning streak, which is tops in the league. It's easy to forget that the Cavs' eight losses include stumbles against mediocre teams like Toronto, Chicago, Charlotte, and Memphis. A win against the Nets looks the same in the standings as a win against the Lakers.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the Cavs have built a 1.5-game lead on the Magic for the East's number one seed. Now the Cavs head back to The Q to duel with Charlotte and Washington before starting a five-game West Coast swing on Friday. The Wizards always play the Cavs tough, but it sure would be sweet for the Cavs to take a nine-game winning streak with them to the Left Coast next week.

### **2. Cleaning the windows.**

The Cavs and Nets both had bad shooting games, turnovers were basically even, and each team had almost identical numbers at the charity stripe. The Cavs won this game on the glass, as they out-rebounded the Nets 52 to 38, which included grabbing 8 more offensive boards than the home club.

This brings to me a tangent on Shaquille O'Neal. Plenty of folks in the national media don't seem to think that adding Shaq has done much to improve the Cavs. Aside from the fact that the Cavs rather quietly dispatched both the Magic and Lakers (very comfortably, I might add), I can understand where they're coming from. Shaq is always an injury risk, has diminishing skills, and isn't a stretch big guy that will open up the lane for LeBron.

The counter to those arguments is that nobody's going to be able to out-muscle the Cavs inside anymore, and Shaq has made a very good rebounding team into a great rebounding team. Those are things that national voices might not be able to detect if they don't watch the Cavs regularly. Bigs like Dwight Howard and Pau

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Gasol can still hurt the Cavs, but Shaq's mere presence makes their lives much more difficult, and makes it very unlikely that any center is going to take over a game and beat the Cavs on his own.

Adding Shaq also makes it very tough for opponents to crash the boards for offensive rebounds. Zydrunas Ilgauskas is 7' 3" and he's also a bean pole. Opposing bigs can jockey for rebounds against Z. By contrast, if Shaq has position on you, you're not getting inside. Integrating Shaq is still a work in progress, and it might not make the Cavs a better team night in and night out. But what it will do is make them a tougher out in the playoffs, and the focus of this team is late April through early June.

### **3. The rookie wall?**

After bursting onto the scene early in the season, J.J. Hickson has slowed down in the last few weeks. Recently, Hickson's scoring, rebounds, and playing time have all dipped. Considering that this is really J.J.'s first full year of NBA action, it's not unreasonable to suggest that maybe he's hitting the "rookie wall" when a player's body has trouble adjusting to rigors of the marathon-like NBA schedule.

That's not an invalid argument, but Hickson's energy level doesn't appear to have diminished. While fatigue could be a contributing factor, it's also likely that the league is adjusting to Hickson's game, and it's time for the second-year pro to counterpunch. If Hickson keeps working to refine his technique, he should get back on track.

One of the great things about the position that Hickson's in is that he's the fourth or fifth scoring option in the starting five, so there's not any pressure on him to

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pour in 15 or 20 points on a regular basis. Although he'll probably be inconsistent all year long, I wouldn't be shocked if Hickson decides to randomly get red hot for a few games in the playoffs, a la Drew Gooden, and become a huge contributor in a handful of postseason victories.

### **4. Don't look now, but Andy's scoring.**

I had very mixed emotions about the Varejao signing this summer because it meant that the Cavs were a long shot to have the cap space for a max deal in 2010. Varejao was definitely an important part of the team, and the money wasn't all that bad when you consider the market for big guys, but would Varejao ever give the Cavs anything beyond energy, rebounding, and taking the occasional charge? I'm starting to change my tune.

Varejao has scored 14 and 15 points in the last two games, respectively, and although his scoring numbers are actually slightly lower than they were last season, he looks like he's getting better around the rim. Much of Varejao's offensive game - open runs to the rim fed by LeBron, and scads of whirling dervish flips around the rim that somehow drop - appears to be unsustainable. But Varejao has been playing like that for so long that his ugly baskets are starting to fall regularly. At what point do we just concede that this is simply how he plays?

A/V is never going to put up 20 and 10 every night, but 12-15 points and 8-10 boards is probably realistic. When you combine that with his sneakily improving defense, constant hustle, and undeniable chemistry with LeBron, Varejao should be able to reward Danny Ferry's faith in him. Assuming that LeBron stays, I see Varejao as the starting center of an extremely fast and athletic 2010-11 Cavs team that plays the kind of up-tempo basketball that any team with LeBron James should play, and I think Varejao will do just fine.

### **5. I don't heart NY/NJ.**

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Obviously we're all hoping for a Cavaliers title, but the overlying question this season is whether or not LeBron's going to jump ship. I don't know about you, but if I have to choose between winning a title this season and knowing 100% that LeBron's staying, I'll take the latter 10 times out of 10. With that in mind, we really need to watch potential 2010 LeBron destinations and wish nothing but the worst upon them.

Two of those potential destinations include New York and New Jersey. At this point, I'm not sure which would be a more likely target for LeBron. Gun to my head, it's probably New York. The Knicks are 13-20. That's bad, but it's not epically bad. Plus, the Knicks have Mike D'Antoni, and LeBron's affection for New York has been documented far more thoroughly than any of us would like.

However, the Knicks are still scrambling to undo the mistakes of one Isiah Thomas, and they still have to fight their way out of some unbelievably bad contracts. General manager Donny Walsh still has to find creative ways to free up enough cap space to make New York a desirable destination for LBJ.

As far as the sheer setup of the team, the Nets are probably a bigger threat. The Nets only have \$25 million committed next season, and they have quietly assembled some solid young talent. Consider this starting five: Devin Harris, Courtney Lee, Chris Douglas-Roberts, Yi Jianlian, and Brook Lopez. That's not bad. Harris might not be a pure point guard, but the guy can score. Yi is a very skilled seven-footer, and Brook Lopez looks like he'll be an All-Star for the next decade. That's a young group of young guys with whom LeBron could grow.

But early injuries combined with a lack of depth may have taken the Nets out of the LeBron Sweepstakes. After losing to the Cavs the Nets are 3-30. Three-and-thirty - as in 3 wins against 30 losses. Even in the East, the Nets are going to have a hard time hitting 25 or 30 wins, and that's assuming they can keep their core group healthy. I just don't know if they can get into LeBron's ear with such a lousy record.

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The moral of the story, of course, is that we need to focus our collective telekinetic powers on keeping the Knicks and Nets among the dregs of the league. Take the Knicks and Nets out of the equation, and our main worry becomes Miami, with Los Angeles and Chicago as dark horse candidates. Although Danny Ferry hasn't done a perfect job of building a team around LeBron, it's looking more likely that he may have done just enough, as the other teams who are courting the young superstar have shot themselves in their respective feet time and again.

### 6. Speaking of Yi...

How angry must Milwaukee fans be that the Bucks cut bait with Yi two years ago? Yi's had injury problems during each of his three seasons, but he's been putting up some big numbers since he came back from injury in December. Yi struggled shooting this afternoon and only scored 11, but in his 4 previous games he had 22, 17, 29, and 22 points, respectively, and shot 55% or higher in 3 of the 4. Although he still has to shake the injury bug, there's no doubt that Yi has potential to be a quality scorer.

The Bucks sent Yi and Bobby Simmons to the Nets for Richard Jefferson during the 2008 Draft, which got the Nets out from under Jefferson's contract. Then Milwaukee traded Jefferson to the Spurs in 2009, basically for cap relief. Congratulations Bucks GM John Hammond! You have traded away a cost-controlled young player with serious potential and Chinese marketing opportunities for absolutely nothing!

### 7. The Cavs were playing the Nets, not the Raptors.

Late in the second quarter LeBron was called for a travel even though he absorbed some significant contact from Trenton Hassell. LeBron pled his case to the zebra, but to no avail. Then LeBron showed the ref his arm, which had been *cut up by Hassell's fingernails*

. Sure zebra, no contact there. As long as we're making

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### *Jurassic Park*

references, why not cue Milwaukee Bucks GM

[John Hammond](#)

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## **8. Always improving.**

As much as he goofs off, LeBron James works pretty hard to improve his game. We've seen huge improvements in his defense the last two years, but an area in which LeBron has improved that hasn't gotten its due is his free throw shooting. After shooting 69.8% and 71.2% in '06-'07 and '07-'08, respectively, LeBron has cracked 78% in each of the last two seasons.

That might only be a few percent, but when you consider that LeBron is always among the league leaders in free throw attempts, it's huge. It is be especially huge in the playoffs when LeBron is usually a lock to take double-digit foul shots every game.

**Up next: 1/3/2010, Charlotte Bobcats, Quicken Loans Arena, 6:00**