

The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}
Monday, January 04 2010 7:00 PM -

That's right - we're in the Dead Zone of the NBA season. The novelty of the new season has long since worn off, but it's still several weeks before the playoff jockeying begins in earnest. The Cavs took two from Atlanta, sleptwalked through a win in Jersey, then fell at home to the Bobcats this week. In his regular Tuesday piece for us, this week John Hnat looks at those four contests, the performance of coach Mike Brown, the J.J. Hickson Watch, the performance of the Cavs bench, Gil Arenas pulling a gun on a teammate, and the week that lies ahead for the wine and gold.



THE SUMMARY:

We never mince words here at the GBS. Instead of recapping last week's games under the name "The Summary," let's call a spade a spade:

THE MEH:

That's right - we're in the Dead Zone of the NBA season. The novelty of the new season has long since worn off (in fact, we are almost halfway through the regular season, if you can believe it), but it's still several weeks before the playoff jockeying begins in earnest.

Yes, the games played now count as much as the ones played in March and April, but it is hard to sustain a high intensity level for months on end.

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As a veteran team (and even more so with the addition of Shaquille O'Neal), the Cavs know this. Last year, they played intense ball from wire to wire, and ended up exhausted by the Orlando series (remember the image of LeBron James barely having the power to limp off the court after Game One?).

This year, they are taking it a bit easier. We're not seeing as many of the 20 and 30-point blowouts over the New Jerseys and Indianas of the league.

And that reason helps explain why the Cavs played a lot of uninspired ball last week.

They still notched a 3-1 record for the week, and nobody can legitimately complain about that.

Win three out of every four all season long, and you are an elite 60-win team.

It was more about
how
they got there than the end result.

The week started with a pair of impressive wins over Atlanta, who had been breathing down the Cavs' necks in the Eastern Conference race. The Cavs first trounced the Hawks in Atlanta, 95-84, thanks mainly to suffocating defense in the second half.

The next night, the Cavs won again, coming back from as many as 17 points down to edge the Hawks, 106-101.

(That game had just a wee bit of controversy; we'll talk about that later.)

And then came two of the more boring games of the season - a 94-86 paint-by-numbers victory over the Nets (who are safely ensconced as the worst team in the league), and a 91-88 loss to Charlotte at home. The loss to the Bobcats snapped the Cavs' seven-game winning streak.

The Cavs presently sit atop the Central Division by a couple of parsecs: Chicago is 10.5 games behind them, and the rest of the Central is sinking so fast, James Cameron may make a [movie](#) about them someday.

In the more-important Eastern Conference race, Cleveland is tied with Boston for the top spot, with Orlando a game and a half behind, the Hawks three games behind them, and the rest of

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the conference a mere speck in the distance.

THE GOOD:

Credit Where Credit Is Due: Being a coach of a professional sports team is a largely thankless job. When you win, your players get the credit. When you lose, you get much of the blame.

Everybody in town is convinced they can do your job better than you.

And unless you are Jerry Sloan or Phil Jackson, you know that you probably have an expiration date of a few years at most.

That's why we're leading off the happy side of the ledger by praising Coach Mike Brown. Yesterday, he was named the NBA's Coach of the Month, an honor he earned by guiding the Cavs to a 14-3 December (including road wins at Phoenix, Atlanta, and the Lakers).

That honor is nice, but nobody will remember it two weeks from now.

(Don't believe me?

Then tell me this - how many times has LeBron won Player of the Week or Player of the Month honors?)

Coach Brown particularly deserves the award because the Cavs (as usual) are winning with defense, and defense has been his mantra from day one. (Hard to believe that "day one" was four and a half years ago, no?)

The fourth quarter of Cavs - Hawks I showed this:

the Cavs held Atlanta scoreless for almost nine minutes, and by the time the Hawks did break the seal on the rim, the outcome was no longer in any real doubt.

Holding a team like the Hawks to ten points in a quarter is pretty damn impressive.

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He Makes A Coach Look A Lot Smarter: Of course, it also helps knowing that when all else fails, you have the game's best player around to pull your team's butts out of whatever hole they've gotten themselves into. That's exactly what James did in Cavs-Hawks II last Wednesday.

His 48 points were a season high, and he added ten rebounds and six assists to round out his usual stat-stuffer line.

Statistic Of The Week: In four games and 162 minutes of playing time last week, James turned the ball over a total of nine times. *Nine times* (uttered in the same voice that Principal Rooney used in [*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*](#)).

For as much as he handles the ball, that is terrific.

Statistic Of The Week, Part II: When I look at a Cavs game summary, I want to know three things. One, how the team did when LeBron was on the bench. (The Cavs can outscore anybody when King James is on the court; if they can outscore an opponent without him, then I know they are playing good team ball.) Two, how Mo Williams did. (This is my often-stated First Rule of the Cavs:

as Mo goes, so go the Cavs.

Again, LeBron can drop 40 points on anybody; I want to know whether he had any help.)

And three, how the team rebounded.

Last week, the Cavs' box scores were in their happy place, because the Cavs won the rebounding battle in all four games (and Atlanta in particular has some solid rebounders, making those two games even more impressive).

THE BAD:

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The J.J. Hickson Watch: It's become a regular feature in this column, and will continue until the inevitable deadline deal and/or return of Leon Powe. There is some good news here:
Hickson did have 19 points and 16 rebounds.

The problem is that those were his totals for the *week*, spanning some four games.

Understand, J.J. is not on this team to put up gaudy numbers. Out of the five starters, he is probably the sixth option on offense.

And he does show flashes of good play, such as the stretch in the Bobcats game when he blocked two shots (although honestly, one of them looked like a goaltend to me), then scooped up a loose ball at the other end for an easy dunk.

But the numbers don't lie (they may whisper some sweet nothings, but they never actually fib); and Hickson's numbers consistently say that the Cavs are a better team with him on the bench than with him on the court. He has athleticism to burn, but that's not what the Cavs need; they need a heady player who won't make mistakes and who is where he is supposed to be, when he is supposed to be there. J.J. is not that player, at least not yet.

Trust me. When we get to March, and Powe/Trade Deadline Pickup is starting at power forward for this team, you'll see what I mean.

Stumbling Out Of The Gate: Although it's tempting to pin a lot of the blame on Hickson, the Cavs as a whole have been sputtering in the first quarter lately. Most of the season (as well as all of last season), the Cavs were a strong first quarter team:

they would routinely score 30+ points and have the lead by the time the first quarter buzzer sounded.

Last week, the most they scored in the first quarter (in four games) was 24 points, and they were trailing after the first stanza in three of those games.

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Wait a minute! I just realized that the Cavs *won* those three games, and *lost* the game in which they held a lead at the end of the first quarter!

Maybe that should be their new approach - lull opposing teams into a false sense of security, then strike in the second half.

It Was The Best Of Times ... But Mostly, It Was The Worst Of Times: I'm not going to say much here, because a week from now they could make any criticisms of their games look very stupid, but ... let's just say it wasn't the best of weeks for Cavs reserves Zydrunas Ilgauskas (who had a solid 15 points in Cavs-Hawks I, then a total of nine points on 2-of-7 shooting for the rest of the week) and Delonte West (who also had a strong performance in Cavs-Hawks I, scoring 17 points, and then mostly disappeared in the subsequent three games).

One of the key differences between this year's team and last year's version is the bench. This year, the Cavs have ten legitimate players in the rotation (nine, really, as Daniel Gibson seems to have become the odd man out in recent weeks).

Last year, Z and Delonte were starting, which meant significant minutes for the Sasha Pavlovics of the team.

(
No, I will never get away from throwing a jab or two at Sasha.

Even when the Cavs win the title, and the victory parade goes through Public Square, I will probably find a way to work Sasha into the column.

)

When Z and Delonte play well (along with Anderson Varejao, who really should get some consideration for the NBA's Sixth Man Award), the Cavs are almost unbeatable.

When they don't ... that's when Charlotte upsets you at home.

DO REFEREES LOSE GAMES?:

Ask an Atlanta fan this question, and they may well say yes.

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But the answer is no.

In case you missed it, the Cavs-Hawks II game had a touch of controversy. With just under two minutes remaining in the game, and the Cavs down 99-98, Mo Williams missed a jumper.

The Hawks corralled the rebound, which should have caused the shot clock to reset to 24 seconds.

Unfortunately, the Quicken Loans Arena shot clocks did not reset. Maybe there was an equipment failure. (Can you imagine the technical support for a scoreboard?

"If you have a shot clock malfunction, press one.

If the scoreboard's fireworks accidentally took out Section 132, press two ...")

Maybe the shot clock operator was ordering a hot dog.

I do not know.

Whatever the reason, the shot clock continued to run down, and none of the referees noticed it.

With one second remaining on the clock, the Hawks' Josh Smith lost the ball while driving for a shot, and the turnover led to a Varejao layup at the other end.

The Cavs now led by a point, and would not trail the rest of the way.

So were the Hawks homered? Let's break it down into smaller questions.

Did the referees blow it? Yes they did. The refs are supposed to keep track of the shot clock, and to stop play if the clock isn't accurate. There is no doubt that the shot clock did not reset after Williams' missed shot, leaving the Hawks with only 13-14 seconds to run a play.

Did the blown call cost the Hawks the game? No. The only time a blown call arguably costs a team a game is when it occurs at the very end, with no chance to overcome it.

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Think of the

[1972 Olympic basketball finals](#)

(although that was less of a blown call, and more of a pro wrestling-level predetermined outcome).

Besides, referee error is part of the game. There's a saying in law: the Constitution guarantees a fair trial, not a perfect one.

The same principle holds here.

Referees can call the game as fairly as possible, but they are still going to make mistakes.

It happens.

It's part of the game, and it has to be accepted, because as long as the referees are human, occasional mistakes will happen.

Don't want a late call to affect the outcome of the game? *Then don't blow a 17 point lead in the second half.*

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

For only the second time in the past eight weeks, the Cavs are enjoying two days off (well, maybe not *off*, but at least without games) right now. Tomorrow night, they'll face off against the Bullets ... wait a second, we need to interrupt this section to talk about Washington for a moment ...

REALLY, ARE YOU KIDDING ME?

Teammates bickering? Sure, I get that. Imagine spending month after month with your co-workers - not only seeing them at work, but also traveling with them, staying at the same

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hotels, eating at the same restaurants - you would probably get tired of them and snap a little bit yourself.

Having a gambling debt? Okay, I can see that one too. I'm not much of a gambler myself, but some people are; particularly pro athletes, who are used to taking chances and needing thrills.

But *teammates pulling guns on each other because of a gambling debt*? Now we're in Twilight Zone territory. This is the NBA's answer to wearing pots as hats and then charging head-first into each other.

As the **Official Cavs Homer™**, my concern here is not whether Gilbert Arenas and Javaris Crittenton came close to using each other for target practice. No
, my concern is,
does this increase the chances that Bullets management will throw up their hands, blow up the team, and start over?

Because if they do, then Antawn Jamison may hit the market.

(On the other hand, maybe this incident could give the Bullets a reason to void the 300-year, \$468 zillion contract they gave to Arenas last year.

If so, then they've already done a large part of their rebuilding.)

WHAT LIES AHEAD (CONTINUED):

Okay, after the Cavs get done playing Washington tomorrow evening, they'll head back to the West Coast for their longest road trip of the season. Friday night will find them in Denver, and then they'll have a back-to-back set on Sunday and Monday at Portland and Golden State, respectively. That road swing will continue through next weekend.

After that, the schedule gets much easier, as 11 of the subsequent 13 games will be at Quicken Loans Arena.