

Six Points: Cavs 94 Pacers 73

Written by {ga=mrburns}

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Was this a game or a scrimmage? The Cavs stomped the Pacers in Indianapolis last night, and it often felt more like a varsity/junior varsity game than an NBA contest.

LeBron James had 13 assists and scored 22 points in spite of a bad shooting night, and Shaq poured in 22 points in less than 25 minutes as the Pacers had no answer for the big man down low. As opposed to Wednesday night's game against the Timberwolves, which was close for over a quarter, the Cavs came out guns blazing and doubled up the Pacers 36-18 in the first quarter.

From that point on, the game was never in doubt. That first quarter beat down clearly broke the Pacers' will, and not to question their professionalism, but they didn't appear to be giving 100% effort for the rest of the game. In that type of game against a clearly superior opponent, a team like the Pacers can try to fight back, which would probably prompt another onslaught by the opposition's starters, or they can go through the motions for the last 36 minutes and hit the showers. Teams that are 16-30 tend to fold when you hit them with a first quarter haymaker, and the Pacers helped illustrate that last night.

1. Cruise control.

After several tough games that came down to the final minutes, it's nice for the Cavs to have a handful of games that they can win comfortably. That was the case against Minnesota and Indiana, and four of the Cavs' next five include home dates against the LA Clippers, Memphis, New York, and New Jersey. Those could all be easy wins if the Cavs don't play sloppy first halves.

The Cavs don't go back on the road until after the All-Star break. Other than the four games I just mentioned, the Cavs also face off against the Heat and the Magic at The Q. If they can

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take care of business against the four weaker opponents and split against the two Florida squads, they should be pleased with where they stand at the break. And even if they only go 4-2 during this stretch, that wouldn't be the worst thing in the world considering their injuries at guard.

2. Speaking of injuries...

Losing Mo Williams and Delonte West definitely hurt, but as long as nobody else goes down the Cavs should be able to play through it for awhile. This is one of the softest stretches in their schedule, plus they'll have the All-Star break to let these guys heal up some more.

We know that Mo Williams' shoulder injury is going to sideline him until early or mid-March, but less is known about Delonte West's fractured left ring finger. Delonte is still listed as day-to-day, and while my gut tells me that he'd be in there if this were the playoffs, I wonder if it doesn't make more sense to just shut him down until after the All-Star break. With their soft upcoming schedule, a 3-3 split looks like a worst case scenario, while 4-2 or 5-1 are both very realistic. With the Cavs up a comfortable 5.5 games in the East, I'd be conservative and let Delonte come back whenever he's truly 100%.

As is often the case in the NBA, one of the Cavs' biggest enemies heading into the playoffs is going to be their collective health. You want to see everybody peaking in mid-April, but that's usually easier said than done. Shaq's playing his best basketball of the season, and ideally you'd like to throw him on ice a la Walt Disney until May, but that's not an option because cryogenic freezing is very expensive and you usually pay by the pound.

Hopefully Mo Williams and Delonte West are getting the injury bugs out of their respective systems and will be ready to roll come April. We saw injuries derail a tough Celtics team last season, and Mike Brown should control his starters' minutes (especially Shaq's) in hope of avoiding a similar fate.

3. An All-Star for at least one night.□

You could make very legitimate arguments for either Shaq O'Neal or Anderson Varejao to make the All-Star team as reserves over Atlanta's Al Horford, largely based on the Cavaliers' success as a team. Then again, New York's David Lee and New Jersey's Brook Lopez have even better arguments. Don't sweat the All-Star Game - it's not the Pro Bowl, but it's still a pretty big waste of time.

In Indiana, Shaq played like an All-Star for at least one night, filling it up with 22 points, 8 boards, and 2 blocks in under 25 minutes of play. The Pacers simply had no answer for the Big Diesel underneath. Shaq went to the line 12 times, and that number easily could have been 20.

They are very different players, but Shaq's dominance in Indianapolis reminded me of how Jermaine O'Neal used to torch the Cavs whenever they squared off against the Pacers. When Jermaine was in his prime he owned Zydrunas Ilgauskas in the post, and for a few years the

Cavs had a ton of trouble with the Pacers. The shoe's on the other foot now. Just think - there was a time when the Cavs couldn't figure out how to win in Conseco Fieldhouse. You've come a long way, baby.

4. Mediocrity breeds mediocrity.□

It isn't some huge secret that in the NBA, you want to be either really good, or really bad. The concept is that you want to be competing for a title or you want to be losing enough games to get lots of ping pong balls for the lottery and be in a position to draft the next MJ, Kobe, LeBron, etc. Cavs fans can testify to the fact that one guy can turn a franchise around in the NBA, so if you're going to lose, you want to go down like the Titanic.

Unfortunately for Pacers fans, the team doesn't seem to get the message. The Pacers won 36 games the last two seasons, 35 games in '06-'07, and 41 in '05-'06. They're usually good enough to either sneak into the playoffs or be eliminated late in the season, which makes it tough to draft an impact player.

Consider the Pacers' three first round picks over the last two years: Tyler Hansbrough (#13 - 2009), Roy Hibbert (#17 - 2008), and Brandon Rush (via trade for Jerryd Bayless, who was #11 in 2008). Those are three quality guys who I'd like to stash away on the Cavs' roster. But all of those guys (except Hansbrough, who is worse) are just marginal starters on a bad team, and would be the 7th or 8th guy on a good team.

When you continually draft in the teens, there simply aren't many franchise players available, and your chances of getting the few that slide down there are minimal. It's a tough pill to swallow, but the Pacers probably have to take their medicine for a season or two so that they can draft a quality counterpart to the excellent Danny Granger.

5. Daniel Gibson: pseudo point guard.□

I like that Mike Brown seems to have learned his lesson with Daniel Gibson - the guy simply isn't a point guard. Gibson is an undersized two who can come in and make threes. A player like that has value to the Cavs, and I was worried that with Mo and Delonte on the shelf, Brown would once again try to stuff a square peg into a round hole.

That hasn't been the case so far. Gibson can handle the ball well enough if a situation calls for that, but the Cavs seem content to run a point guard by committee and also let LeBron handle the ball more in the absence of the starters. Daniel Gibson finally seems to be re-establishing a role in the rotation, and you don't want to screw that up by restarting a failed experiment. Hopefully Delonte West can return soon to take some pressure off of Gibson and LeBron.

6. LeBron: DPOY?

There's been talk this week about LeBron James and Anderson Varejao as candidates for Defensive Player of the Year.□ Without getting off on a tangent about the meaninglessness of these awards, it's going to be difficult for Varejao to win because he's not a "starter." Varejao plays

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more minutes than JJ Hickson, but the fact that he starts the game on the bench may bias some voters against him. The fact that he's still viewed by many as a "flopper" in spite of the incredible development of his defensive game won't help, either.

LeBron is a different story. He has enough of a defensive highlight reel that you could definitely make a good case for him as DPOY, but Brian Windhorst pointed out that voters will likely be biased against him because he seems like a slam dunk to win his second consecutive MVP award.

Plus, I don't buy LeBron as the best defender in the league. That's an award that should go to a low post defender who guards the rim, and the best in the league right now is probably Dwight Howard. We saw firsthand how you have to game plan around Howard in last year's Eastern Finals, and he will probably earn his second DPOY award as he's leading the league in blocks and swats.

Now, LeBron as the best help defender in the league? That's a position I could champion. Nobody comes out of thin air more often to pin a ball to the backboard, and nobody will come close to matching LBJ in chase down blocks this season. LeBron has finally put his freakish athleticism to work on the defensive end during the last two seasons, and it's been a joy to watch.

LeBron gave us one of those moments last night in the fourth quarter when Brandon Rush was driving the lane for what seemed like an easy layup. LeBron moved towards the hoop, faked a jump for a block, and drew enough of Rush's attention that he missed an easy layup. My guess is that won't be the first time LeBron has that effect on an opponent.

Up next: 1/31, Los Angeles Clippers, 6:00