

Cavs Lose Third Straight, Fall in Orlando

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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The Cavaliers performed markedly better in Orlando Sunday than they did in Charlotte on Friday, which isn't saying a whole heck of a lot. But the end result was still the same- a loss. Getting a big finishing kick from Jameer Nelson and The Vince Carter, the Magic swallowed up a five-point fourth-quarter deficit and came back to defeat Cleveland, 101-95. The Cavaliers have now lost three straight games, their longest skein since 2007-08, and with games coming up against the Hornets, at Boston and at Toronto it could get worse before it gets better.

First, the Positives: And there were positives in this game. Shaquille O'Neal more than held up his end in his personal grudge match with Superman Jr., Dewey Howard. The Big Aristotle hit 9-of-10 from the field and scored 20 points, nearly off-setting Dewey's 22 (although Shaq was out-rebounded decisively, 16-5.)

Better yet, Antawn Jamison showed up, and showed up large. The rangy forward popped for 19 points on 9-of-14 shooting, and his eight quick third-quarter points were the impetus in a Cavalier run that turned a 49-43 halftime deficit into a 62-55 lead. Unfortunately, Jamison couldn't avoid foul trouble; he picked up his fourth personal in the third quarter, was assessed his fifth on a lousy call that should have been a charge on Dewey Howard, and finally fouled out of the game with less than a minute left.

Other good signs: the Cavaliers dominated the Magic on the boards, winning the rebounding battle 55-42, and outscored their hosts in bench points, 30-28.

Try Them Underhanded, Maybe: Poor free-throw shooting has been a critical factor in Cleveland's three-game losing streak and the disquieting trend continued on Sunday. The

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Cavaliers were 16-of-25 from the stripe, a sub-par 64 percent; in the losses to Denver, Charlotte and now Orlando the Cavaliers are just 56-of-90 (62.2 percent) from the free-throw line. That isn't even close to good enough. And you can't put Sunday's poor figure on Shaquille O'Neal- he drilled both of his attempts.

LeBron's Line: 33 points on 12-of-25 from the field, 1-of-6 from three-point range and 8-of-12 from the line with 9 rebounds, 6 assists, 2 steals and a blocked shot. The block, in the first quarter, was LeBron's highlight of the day; he stuffed Dewey Howard at the rim with both hands and roared the other way for a driving lay-up. Overall, though, it wasn't one of LeBron's vintage performances. He committed five turnovers, continued to struggle from downtown (4-of-21 since the All-Star Break) and scored just three points in the crucial fourth quarter.

The Fatal Run: Cleveland led 85-80 midway through the fourth period when Jameer Nelson and The Vince Carter, Orlando's matched set of underachievers, suddenly took over. The pair combined for 16 straight Magic points over the next four minutes, going 7-of-7 from the field- including some high degree-of-difficulty shots- to turn Orlando's five-point deficit into a 96-88 lead with two minutes to play. Two Nelson three-pointers were especially painful; the first gave the Magic an 89-85 lead with 3:56 remaining, while the second made it an eight-point game at the two-minute mark and for all intents and purposes put it away. Overall the Magic knocked down their last eight attempts from the field, while at the same time the Cavaliers were just 4-of-12. That was the difference in the game.

Three Men and a Bunch of Babies: LeBron James, Shaquille O'Neal and Antawn Jamison combined for 72 points on 30-of-49 shooting (61.2 percent.) The other seven Cavaliers who saw action combined for 23 points on 8-of-33 shooting (24.2 percent.) Anderson Varejao's six points were the highest total by any Cavalier not named LBJ, Shaq or 'Twan. Orlando's attack was far more balanced; five Magicians scored in double figures, with Dewey Howard's 22 the high figure.

Bad Stat: Prior to Sunday's defeat the Cavaliers hadn't lost three consecutive games since March 22-29, 2008. They haven't lost more than three in a row since November 28-December 8, 2007, when they dropped six straight.

Silver Lining Time: A loss is a loss, a losing streak is a losing streak, and in sports the scoreboard is ultimately the first, last and final arbitrator. Still, even in defeat, it's obvious that the match-up problems that bedeviled the Cavaliers last season against Orlando just aren't there anymore. Cleveland now has answers for both Dewey Howard and Rashard Lewis, the two main factors in Orlando's Eastern Conference Finals conquest, and the Cavaliers are also

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deep enough to offset Orlando's excellent bench. Speaking personally, I'm no less confident in Cleveland's chances against the Magicians in a potential playoff series than I was before Sunday. If it comes to cases I like our chances against this basketball team- a lot.

Of Course: It *would* be nice to see Charlotte play someone aside from the Cavaliers in the playoffs. Its funny- you painstakingly build a team to match up with the elites, with the Orlando's and L.A.'s of the league, you succeed in doing so, and then you turn around and the freaking Charlotte Bobcats have your number. On second though, that isn't so funny.

Next: Tuesday night at 7:30, when the New Orleans Hornets, sans Chris Paul, come to town. Darren Collison has done an outstanding job running the point in Paul's absence, so this isn't going to be a walkover by any stretch.