

The Cavs Show Solid Effort . . . But It Isn't Enough to Stop Their Slide

Written by {ga=jdclevelandfan}

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The Cleveland Cavaliers were in Houston to play the Rockets on Saturday night.

No, they didn't win . . . and no, it wasn't all that close.

The Cavs lost 95-110, to drop their record to 7-16. They've now lost seven straight, which dates back to their win against Memphis in Cleveland during Thanksgiving weekend. They've also now lost eight straight away games, dating back to a November 9th win in New Jersey. Yup, that was over a month ago.

The Rockets, who actually seem much better than their 9-14 record, were also without two key players: Yao Ming and Aaron Brooks.

As usual, the Rockets' Luis Scola was uncontrollable. He had 14 points and 14 rebounds

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(including six offensive boards). And Kevin Martin had arguably his best game of the season, with a season-high 40 points (on 13-of-17 shooting).

Cleveland also had a *rest* advantage on Houston. The Cavs last played (and lost) on Wednesday night against the Chicago Bulls at The Q. The Rockets were on the second half of a back-to-back. They lost to the Bucks in Milwaukee on Friday night. But that didn't end up being a factor.

Unfortunately, it doesn't get much better for the Cavs.

The Houston game was the start of a four-game road trip, which will next stop in Oklahoma City (16-8) tonight, in Miami (17-8) on Wednesday night, and then in Indiana (11-11) on Friday.

All that being said, there definitely were some positives in this game.

First of all, the game was fairly competitive through the first three quarters. The Cavs played with energy on both ends of the floor in the first, but weren't able to get many stops. The Rockets scored 37 points in that quarter. Clearly, the defense was lacking . . . but the Rockets did shoot 6-for-8 from beyond the arc in the quarter, and the Cavs *were* really trying, at least individually, on defense.

After one, the Cavs were down eight points, and that was basically the gap for most of the game. In the third quarter, after falling behind by 13, Cleveland staged their best shot at evening things up. The Cavs held the Rockets scoreless for almost four minutes - and got within four - but then the Rockets put it away. By the end of the third quarter, the Cavs were down 17 (75-92). And that was it.

The offense actually looked good. The dry spells that have plagued the Cavs all season (and will continue to plague them until they get or develop a go-to guy) were still there, but they were minimized by a real effort to drive the ball into the paint.

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Mo Williams and Antawn Jamison were great at that. Whatever Mo does to put himself into that gear that he was in on Saturday night, he should do more often. He was fearlessly driving the ball in, and then passing it off either to someone else inside, or to someone on the arc. Some of those passes were near *sleight of hand*. Twice I didn't even see Mo pass the ball until his target was scoring.

His shots came in the flow of the offense. In fact, there was only one time where he seemed to be pressing. (He attempted - and missed - two threes in one possession at the end of the second quarter.)

Mo finished with 18 points (on 6-of-13 shooting) with nine assists and two rebounds.

Jamison was also impressive. He had his three-ball going early in the game . . . but he didn't become content just to hang out in the background and shoot jumpers. At least twice he froze his defender outside . . . and then created a higher-percentage shot for himself moving toward the hoop.

Jamison ended with a team-high 24 points (on 9-of-15 shooting; 3-of 3 behind the arc) with five rebounds, two assists, two steals and a block.

Daniel Gibson had a pretty good game as well. He had 12 points (on 3-of-9 shooting) with four steals, four rebounds, and three assists. (He also drove to the basket and drew a couple fouls.) And Anderson Varejao had yet another good hustle game. He finished with 11 points and eight rebounds.

But on the flipside, J.J. Hickson had another off game. Statistically, he had five points and five rebounds in 18 minutes. And while he seemed to be focusing on scoring in the post, he wasn't all that effective . . . and just seemed lost within the offense. If there's one guy that Coach Byron Scott needs to push the reset button with it's J.J. It looks like he's thinking way too much (or not at all). He's not playing with energy and confidence and letting the game come to him. And he's still taking too many jumpers.

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(Here's an interesting stat: J.J. scored in double-digits in eight of his first nine games this season, averaging 16 points. In the 13 games he's played in since, he's only done it twice . . . and he's averaging just 7.2 points per game in that span.)

The bottom line in this one: The Cavaliers weren't able to build on the nice game they played against Chicago last week (in a loss) . . . but they didn't take a step back either. While it was disconcerting to see the Rockets get whatever they wanted on the offensive end, they were also getting lucky . . . and the Cavs were working on defense (while the game was within reach). The next step is to get some team chemistry and consistency on defense to match the intensity level.

And hopefully, that can lead to a few wins . . . even against a challenging schedule.