Somehow, while we were not looking, the Cleveland Cavaliers hit the 50-game mark and, since the calendar turned to 2013, have been playing respectable and, at times, entertaining basketball.

Starting with the Jan. 2 game against Sacramento, the Cavs have gone 9-10, a streak that includes wins in six of their last nine games heading into Monday's game against Minnesota.

In the process, the Cavs have gone from battling Washington for the NBA's worst record to being comfortably in the middle of the non-playoff teams in the Eastern Conference.

With the All-Star Game on the horizon, it seems like a good time to go thumbs up and thumbs down on some things that have stood out to us so far this season.

Thumbs up: Kyrie Irving, the team's All-Star point guard. What more can be said about Irving? During a three-game winning streak at the end of January, Irving averaged 35.7 points per game, 4 rebounds, 4 assists and 1.7 steals. He scored more than 30 points in all three games, becoming just the fifth player in NBA history to have three consecutive 30-point games before his 21st birthday.

Just halfway through his second season with the Cavs he has clearly become the team's leader, as evidence by his willingness to take the last shot of the game – and have his

teammates looking to him for that shot.

He is sixth in the league in scoring and third among all guards.

Thumbs down: Uh ... there is ... wait, we're looking.

Irving doesn't always play defense the way that coach Byron Scott would like.

"I want it all, " Scott said earlier in the season . "I'm serious. I do. I want him to be a complete basketball player. That means giving it on both ends every single night. If you ask Kyrie he wants to be a complete basketball player. From that standpoint I'm going to be very demanding. The biggest thing with him is he's getting to that point where he has to want to take that challenge every single night."

There are also the ongoing injury concerns. After missing 15 games his rookie season, Irving has already missed 11 games this season with a broken left finger and also fractured his jaw.

Fans have to wonder if, by the time the Cavs are ready to really compete, if Irving will still be in one piece. But we're getting ahead of ourselves; we can worry about Irving's health once the Cavs are ready to compete.

Thumbs up: Anderson Varejao will finish the season with career highs in points (14.1 per game) and rebounds (14.4). And it looks like he will still be on the Cavs through the remaining three years of his contract.

Thumbs down: Varejao will be sticking around because, for the third consecutive year, he is lost for the season with an injury. First it was surgery for a split quad muscle that turned into a hospital stay for blood clots in his right lung.

It's frustrating because over the past couple of years Varejao has turned into a valuable player for the Cavs – both on the court and as a potential trade chip. But his streak of bad luck with injuries has hurt the Cavs on multiple fronts.

Here's hoping that Varejao can finally find some good health when he comes back next season.

Thumbs up: With Varejao out, Tristan Thompson has seen his numbers consistently go up across the board, while essentially playing the same number of minutes per game. Thompson is also posting similar home and road splits, scoring 10.8 points per game at home vs. 11.8 on the road, and grabbing 8.9 rebounds per game at home and 9.3 on the road. That is the kind of consistency that the coaching staff has to like.

Thumbs down: With Varejao out, rookie Tyler Zeller has been forced to perhaps play a bit more than Scott would have normally liked. The rookie from North Carolina's shooting percentage seems low for a 7-footer (he's shooting just 41 percent on the season after hitting just 36 percent of his shots in January), but he is grabbing eight rebounds a game in 27 minutes of action.

At just 250 pounds, Zeller is also struggling to adjust to the physical nature of the NBA.

"I definitely need to get tougher," Zeller said in published reports . "I think some of it is going to come as I mature and as I get stronger. Right now I'm kind of undersized for a 5 man. I do what I can, but at the same time you can't really overpower too many people in this league. I've definitely got some work to do, but I don't know that I can do that work right now. I have to wait until the offseason."

Thumbs up: Dion Waiters comes as advertised. He is second on the team in scoring at 14.1 points per game and has moved back into the starting lineup after being put with the second unit. The move seems to have sent the appropriate message to the rookie out of Syracuse.

"At the end of the day, I know coach is trying to help me out," Waiters told *The Beacon Journal* . "He knows

what's best for me and he probably sees something out there I don't see."

Thumbs down: Dion Waiters comes as advertised. Waiters certainly has never seen a shot that he doesn't like. Despite playing just 27 minutes a game, he is second on the team in shot attempts with 13.5 a game. He has also only shot better than 50 percent four times all season.

Waiters has only played 43 NBA games, so there is time for him to figure this all out, and Scott remains optimistic despite Waiters' streakiness.

"He's really starting to understand what being a pro's all about," Scott recently told *The Plain Dealer*. "He's really starting to put in the work before and after practice and it's really starting to pay off. He's playing with a lot more confidence right now. He understands what his role is, even as a starter."

Thumbs up: To general manager Chris Grant for building a bench that doesn't make fans cringe when Scott turns to the second unit. Shaun Livingston is a nice veteran pickup and Grant should get consideration as executive of the year for turning something called Jon Leuer into Marreese Speights, Wayne Ellington, Josh Selby and a future first-round draft pick.

Speights has been able to take some of the load off of Zeller and even if the Cavs turn around and trade all the players they received from Memphis, it is still a win for the team as we will be the first to admit that we had no idea the Cavs had Leuer on the roster in the first place.

Thumbs down: To general manager Chris Grant for thinking about wasting money on Greg Oden, he of the three microfracture knee surgeries.

Sure, it's "only money" but there is little to no chance that Oden will ever be on an NBA court again. It's hard enough for players to come back from one microfracture surgery; to expect a player who has had three of them - and can't get out of a chair without hurting himself - to be able to offer the Cavs anything is the worst kind of scarlet and gray homerism.

The argument for Oden seems to rest on the idea of “you never know” and “it could happen.” Great. Antawn Jamison thinks that Michael Jordan could average double figures in today’s NBA , even though Jordan is 50.

Maybe the Cavs should sign Jordan as a backup shooting guard. Who cares if a 50-year-old has never played in the NBA? “It could happen.”

Thumbs up: To coach Byron Scott for keeping the Cavs (mostly) competitive more nights than not. After all, it was only two years ago at this time that the Cavs were nearing the end of a 26-game losing streak . Fast forward to now, and Scott seems to be doing a decent job with a team dominated by first and second-year players. He also comes across as a good mentor for Kyrie Irving.

Thumbs down: Coach Byron Scott. Three years into his coaching tenure with the Cavs and the team is still struggling to put up wins. For every win against the Lakers, Celtics and Thunder, there are corresponding losses to the Pistons, Kings and Raptors.

It sometimes seems as if Scott gets a bit of a pass from fans because the team he coaches wears Wine and Gold rather than Orange and Brown.

Add it all up and you have a team that, despite being 16-35, is more often than not fun to watch. It’s also a team that is probably ready for the respite that the All-Star break delivers.

Most importantly, the Cavs are slowly turning into a team that is fun to watch and has fans wondering what the second half of the season has in store for the Wine and Gold.

(Photo by Getty Images)