In a pathetic effort that left the home crowd booing, the Cavs stumbled to a 87-71 loss against the Detroit Pistons, in the first match-up between the two teams since their memorable playoff series last May. The Cavs continue to perform miserably in back to backs, and left no question that they still have alot of work to do before considered among the East's elite teams. Johnnie H is frustrated, which clearly shows in todays column.

THE SUMMARY:

They had a chance to give the home fans a Christmas present ... and they turned it into Coal Stocking Night instead. (Make that the Cub Cadet Coal Stocking Night. Every promotion needs a corporate sugar daddy.)

In a pathetic effort that left the home crowd booing, the Cavs stumbled to a 87-71 loss against the Detroit Pistons, in the first match-up between the two teams since their memorable playoff series last May. The lone Cavalier who seemed to have any interest in winning was LeBron James, who posted his usual 26 points and 10 rebounds. Zydrunas Ilgauskas also had a decent game, putting in 16 points. Chauncey Billups' 17 points led Detroit, who had six players score in double figures.

The game was actually rather close most of the way. The Cavs led by as many as six points in the first quarter, getting out to their usual strong start, and held a 24-22 lead after the first stanza. The two teams kept flipping the lead for the next two quarters, with Detroit clinging to a

57-55 advantage at the end of the third quarter.

Then came the fourth quarter. Billups, who has only four points through the first three quarters, came alive, spurring the Pistons to a 20-5 run that put the game away. The Cavs shot 3 for 20 in the quarter. That's 15 percent. I'm not sure where the Mendoza line is for basketball players, but 15 percent is well below it. Coach Mike Brown finally threw in the towel with 2:07 remaining, giving some run to Sasha Pavlovic, David Wesley … and Scot Pollard.

Yes, that means that Pollard had a chance to score his first basket of the season and (one can only imagine) win fifty bucks in his bet with Ira Newble. But where would the drama be if the contest ended now? Pollard, realizing this, did not attempt a shot during his time on the floor. Pollard and Newble are still oh-for-the-season.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

That it ended.

Oh, and there was a pretty decent rerun of "According to Jim" on another channel that spared me a lot of the pain of actually watching the fourth quarter.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

That it showed just how far away this team is from being a serious contender.

The Cavs are unique right now among Cleveland sports teams because they are the one team that is perceived as having some semblance of a shot to win. That shot is solely because of one apocryphal ping pong ball, the one that delivered LeBron James to Cleveland.

Last night was the proof that the Cavs aren't getting It. They aren't close to It. The light currently emanating from the It will not reach them for years. And despite what those eBay spots would make you think, there is no way to easily get It.

As Cleveland fans, we're used to losing. We've wandered in the desert longer than Moses – it's 42 years and counting since the last Cleveland championship. Almost none of the squads that represented our fine city during those years had any chance of winning. The few that did were actors in a play whose end was all too familiar. The battle would be valiant, the gleam of hope always present ... but the final scene always features the opposition basking in glory while the uniform with “Cleveland” on the front of it gets buried under yet another pile of shit.

Look at the other teams in this town. The Indians are the team that is always coming but never arrives. They're always building for three years down the road, they always have 12 of the game's top 10 prospects ... but they never live in the now. Their ownership keeps promising us filet mignon, and keeps delivering White Castle. Each offseason, they practically take out help wanted ads in the local paper. (“WANTED: Relief pitcher for major league baseball franchise. Ability to retire hitters a plus, but not required. Recent major arm injury a big plus. Send resume with salary requirements (they better not be much!) to M. Shapiro, Jacobs Field, Cleveland, OH.”)

At least the Indians provide better value than what our friends on the lakefront have been giving us lately. The Browns are a Perfect Storm of substandard talent, front office incompetence, and horrendous luck. When a good player does fall into their laps – LeCharles Bentley, Kellen Winslow – he is guaranteed to suffer some career threatening injury. (That's if he's lucky. Look at Gary Baxter. It's not often that you get to see a guy's career end on one play – one with no contact, no less.) If said player can injure himself through his own stupidity,

all the better. And when a player does get injured, he gets sent to what on the surface is a “world class” hospital, but actually seems to be a mad scientist's secret breeding ground for a new generation of killer viruses. The Browns have sucked their way to almost total apathy in this city, and that's not easy to do. Well done, Randolph!

That leads us back to the Cavs (yes, this is supposed to be a Cavs column). They were A New Hope. They have one of the game's uber-stars. They have a relatively new owner, the kind with deep pockets and a commitment to see his team win. They spent a ton of money in the free agent market to bring several high-profile players into town. They have a youthful GM and coach with pedigrees of working for several other top teams.

And as I watched this cast of talent stand around last night, apparently unable to comprehend what was hitting them, I realized that none of it makes a damn bit of difference. The team is reverting to LeBron And Four Other Guys.

The Larry Hughes we see bears some resemblance to the guy who played for the Wizards, but this one rarely drives to the hoop, which was always his bread and butter.

Z is what he is: a decent center, a guy who has had a nice career despite injuries that would have had you or me or anybody else reading this running to Mommy a long time ago ... but he's at best a knight, rather than a queen or a rook.

Donyell Marshall has disappeared off the face of the earth (although if we want to find him, we'd do well to start by looking just beyond the earth's three point line).

Drew Gooden is keeping his ratio of one very good game to four or five that put him on the bench for good halfway through the third quarter.

After looking like he was developing some semblance of an offensive game, Anderson Varejao has shown us recently that ... he is indeed developing an *offensive* game.

I could live with some of that. No team is or has ever been perfect. No team -- not even the Russell-vintage Celtics or the Showtime-era Lakers or the Chicago Jordans – has had twelve perfect players.

But last night, I saw a Cavs team that quit. I saw a Cavs team that mailed it in. I saw a Cavs team that played listlessly for three quarters, somehow found itself down by two points heading into the fourth ... and decided that the game was unwinnable anyway. And that is just not acceptable.

In short, I'm frustrated. We believed in these Cavs the way that we once believed in Santa Claus. And we seem to be headed for the same result.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

A hell of a lot more losses unless this team changes its approach, its energy, and maybe its personnel.