Hmmm, where have we seen this before? Cavs get out to early lead at home over team they should handle. Cavs let said team back into game. LeBron James takes over late and seals the win in a game that shouldn't have ever been close in the first place. Now lets see if the Cavs can end their struggles in back to back games, and go into Chicago tonight and get a win over the Bulls. Johnnie Hnat is here with another great recap, making us all wonder who Branson Wright had to blackmail to get his job with the PD on the Cavs beat.

THE SUMMARY:

Wheeee! Roller coaster fans love Ohio! It's the home of the greatest coaster park in the world … and it's also the home of your Cleveland Cavaliers, a team that will make the final outcome interesting no matter how insurmountable the lead seems to be. Fortunately, they held on for a 109-99 victory last night at the Quicken Loans ("Home Of The '0.9% APR For The First Ten Minutes' Mortgage") Arena. The Cavs were led by the trio of LeBron James (32 points), Donyell Marshall (a season-high 29 points), and Larry Hughes (26 points). In fact, the only other Cavs to score were Drew Gooden (14 points) and Zydrunas Ilguaskas (8 points). Michael Redd and Mo Williams paced the Bucks with 24 and 21 points, respectively.

Those who arrived late missed the Cavs grabbing a double-digit lead within minutes of the opening tip. Behind nine points from Hughes and eight each from LeBron and Gooden, the Cavs led by 15 (34-19) after the first quarter. The Cavs continued to stymie the Bucks in the second quarter, extending their lead to 20 points (60-40) at the intermission. Marshall hit three

three-pointers during the quarter, and the quarter ended with Hughes hitting a twisting turnaround shot after retrieving a LeBron air ball.

With 3:23 remaining in the third quarter, the Cavs still led by 19, at 77-58. The Bucks then went on a 21-5 run that cut the lead to 82-79 with about ten minutes left in the game. (Interestingly, this run started exactly after Fox Sports Ohio's Fred MacLeod commented that LeBron should be able to sit for most of the fourth quarter, in order to get some rest. Nice hex, Fred! Welcome to Cleveland!) However, the night's Big Three of LeBron, Hughes, and Marshall hit enough shots down the stretch (culminating with LeBron's back-breaking three-pointer to make it a 109-97 game with less than two minutes left) to put the game away.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

One Great Game Per Night: At some point during the third quarter, MacLeod (there he is again!) commented that LeBron was having an off night. Maybe LeBron heard it, or maybe it was merely the great universal power that is the Anti-Hex. LeBron responded by taking over the game in the fourth quarter, scoring 12 of his 32 points and dishing out four assists (three of them to Marshall for three-pointers). During the quarter, three of the four shots that LeBron made from the field, as well as three of his four assists, came after Milwaukee had scored. In other words, LeBron was not about to let Milwaukee get any sort of a run going. LeBron turned his performance up a notch when the team needed it most. And that is why the post-game team flight was a happy one.

One Great Game Per Month: About once a month, Hughes has a terrific game, one that reminds us why he was able to get a six-year, gazillion-dollar contract. Last night was that game, as Hughes scored 26 points (not too often that such a point total will only be third best on the team) on 10-of-17 shooting. It's no secret that Hughes is not the world's greatest outside shooter, but he was accurate last night, hitting two of three three-pointers and draining some other long jumpers.

More impressively, Hughes is driving to the basket more. Larry is not a good enough shooter that he can simply set up camp 20 feet from the hole; he needs to drive the ball to the basket to be effective. Last night, Hughes hit a three-pointer to give the Cavs a 17-7 lead. On the next possession, Hughes had the ball on the perimeter again, and could have launched another jumper. Instead, he drove hard to the basket, got the layup, and drew a foul as well. That's the Hughes that we need to see.

One Great Game Per Contract: OK, that's unfair. But last night was definitely the best game that Marshall has had while wearing a Cleveland jersey. He shot seven of ten from long range, 11 of 15 overall, and also grabbed ten rebounds (four on the offensive glass). Is this what Marshall would be capable of doing if he received 37 minutes of playing time every night? Certainly he would not be that good every night … but it does make one wonder what he could do with a few more minutes per game.

One Game's An Anomaly, Two's A Trend: Just as they did the other night in Atlanta, the Cavs did a remarkable job of shutting down Milwaukee's top scorer, Redd. The scoresheet does show that Redd scored 24 points; however,

1. 24 points is still below his season average of 28 points per game;

2. Redd sure did not score those points from the field, as he shot a relatively miserable 5 of 16 (missing all three of his three-point attempts as well). He got his points at the line, where he made all 14 of his attempts.

As was the case with Joe Johnson and Atlanta the other evening, the Cavs harassed Redd with a combination of Eric Snow, Hughes, and help from the front court players whenever Redd drove into the lane.

The Resistible Force And The Movable Object Have A New Buddy: This space has frequently chronicled the epic struggle between Ira Newble and Scot Pollard to see which player will be the first to score this season. With Pollard inactive for the game (a decision that I did not like for other reasons, as we will see), and with Newble suiting up, it seemed that Ira

could have a clear path to that first basket of the season.

But there was a third player in the wings. One that we have not mentioned in this space all season, primarily because he has gotten zero playing time and projects to get zero playing time. He is Dwayne Jones. And wouldn't you know it, he was active for last night's game too. And a minute or two into the fourth quarter, Coach Mike Brown called Jones' number. (Gooden and Ilgauskas had both picked up their fifth foul of the game, forcing Coach Brown to look for another large body to play alongside Marshall in the front court.)

With seven minutes remaining in the game, Jones got fouled going for a rebound and stepped to the line for two free throws. You could see the tension on his face – he was torn between sinking the free throws to extend Cleveland's lead, and bricking them both as a way of telling Newble and Pollard that it's a three horse race. To the delight of those (well, me) who have chosen to write about this epic "struggle", Jones clanged both free throws off the back of the rim. All of a sudden, there are now three, when before there were but two.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

Can They Just End The Game At Halftime?: The Cavs have developed a terrible habit of coming out flat in the third quarter. As mentioned during the telecast, the team had averaged only 18.7 points in the third quarter of the previous seven games. The Cavs did not help that average last night; they scored only 11 points in the quarter and saw their 20-point lead shrink to eight.

Unlike other third-quarter collapses that the Cavs have provided this season, this one did not occur immediately. The Bucks did not do most of their damage until the last three minutes of the quarter (as mentioned earlier, the Cavs still led by 19 points with most of the quarter in the books). However, the stage had already been set for the Bucks' resurgence. The Cavs missed several opportunities to push their lead even higher.

Probably their best chance came early in the quarter, when the lead was still 20. LeBron drove the ball hard to the rim. Milwaukee's Brian Skinner grabbed LeBron and sort of threw him into the basket support. The refs rewarded Skinner with the rest of the evening off, calling a Flagrant Two. The Cavs then dropped their own Flagrant Two of sorts, as LeBron split the pair of free throws, then Gooden missed a layup on the following possession.

Somebody Want To Grab That Ball There?: A large reason why Milwaukee was able to get back into the game was the number of offensive rebounds that they were able to get. Had Cleveland continued to limit them to one shot, this game would have been over by the beginning of the fourth quarter, and the remaining question would have been whether the fans would go home with free chalupas.

Instead, I am left to document this series of events, which began with approximately five minutes remaining in the third quarter and the Cavs seemingly in command:

- Milwaukee's Ruben Patterson made a layup after three previous misses (and resulting offensive rebounds) by the Bucks;
- Patterson split a pair of three throws, the result of an offensive rebound and foul on his return shot;
- Patterson rebounded a Charlie Villanueva ("Villanova" according to the crack FSO announcing team) miss and laid it into the hoop;
- Villanueva returned the favor, retrieving a missed Patterson shot and scoring.

After that stretch, the 18 point Cavs lead was down to single digits. The Bucks ended the game with 19 offensive rebounds, which is about ten more than I would have expected the Cavs (the league's fourth-best rebounding team) to surrender to the Bucks (the league's third-worst rebounding team).

Not Just Because He Could Have Scored: I do not understand why Pollard was not active for the game. The Cavs normally split the minutes at the center and power forward positions

between Ilgausakas, Gooden, Marshall, and Anderson Varejao. Varejao was not available for last night's game with a neck injury. Isn't this situation exactly why they signed Pollard this past off-season? Isn't this the sort of game where Pollard could have provided 10-15 minutes of tough play in the pivot? Particularly if one of the three remaining big men got injured or got into foul trouble?

For whatever reason, Pollard was left to sit at the end of the bench in yet another expensive suit. Sure enough, both Gooden and Ilgauskas got into foul trouble. Fortunately for the Cavs, the big man that they did activate (Dwayne Jones) played competently in the few minutes that Coach Brown pressed him into action. Jones grabbed one rebound, fought for several others, and helped the Cavs hold what had become a much narrower lead.

The other negative effect of not having Pollard available: early in the second quarter, Coach Brown had Snow, Daniel Gibson, and Damon Jones all on the court at the same time, as he went with an extremely small lineup. As I write this, hours later, I am still shuddering.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs are in Chicago to face the Bulls this evening. Then, after returning home to pop the champagne corks and get used to the new ball (same as the old ball), they'll face the Spurs on Tuesday.