The Bulls ruined LeBron James' 22nd birthday, and the Cavs struggles in back to back games continued last night, as the good guys fell to Chicago by a score of 103-96. After playing well through two and a half quarters, the Bulls scored a mind-boggling 24 consecutive points, turning a 7 point Cavs lead into a 17 point deficit. John Hnat's here to tell us about the game, and delivers an epic rant on the teams hustle, effort, and desire in this mornings column.

THE SUMMARY:

The Bulls bested the Cavs, 103-96, in a matchup of the two Central Division rivals. LeBron James, gave himself a 22nd birthday present (*damn, he is still only 22 years old*) with 33 points, 9 rebounds, and sore shoulders from having to carry the team so much. Larry Hughes (15 points), Zydrunas Ilgauskas (14) and Donyell Marshall (12) also scored in the double digits for the Cavs, who fell to 17-12 on the season. Luol Deng, who apparently will never miss another outside shot again as a result of a newly-signed deal with the devil, scored a career-high 32 points for the Bulls. The Bulls' win was even more impressive because they were without their point guard, Kirk Hinrich.

Led by Andres Nocioni and Ben Gordon, the Bulls took an early 15-8 lead. The two teams then essentially traded baskets for the rest of the first half – the Bulls never led by more than nine points, but they also never relinquished their lead (although the Cavs did cut the lead to one point on a Daniel Gibson three-pointer just before the half).

The first three minutes of the third quarter were the high point of the game for the Cavs. A jumper by Hughes and a couple of baskets by Ilgauskas (one on a very nice follow of a wayward Eric Snow shot) gave the Cavs a 59-58 lead. On each of their next two possessions, LeBron drained three pointers, both from the same spot beyond the arc. The Cavs had a 65-58 lead, the Bulls were foundering, and the game had apparently shifted in the Cavs' favor.

And then the Bulls shifted it back. After the two teams traded baskets, the Bulls ran off 24 consecutive points. By the time the Cavs realized that the game was still going on, it was too late, as the Bulls had taken an 84-67 lead. The Cavs did mount a challenge and eventually cut the Bulls' lead to four points with a minute remaining, but they could not get any closer.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

3:11: No, I'm not talking about the Bible verse a page before the one that gave rise to the rainbow-haired flake with the sign. I'm referring to the first three minutes and eleven seconds of the third quarter, when the Cavs swung from being three points down to being ahead by seven. During that brief span, the Cavs showed not only offensive skills (capped by the aforementioned three pointers by LeBron), but they were also playing inspired defense (both of the LeBron three-pointers were set up by blocked shots at the other end; one by Ilgauskas, one by Gooden). When the Cavs show that kind of inspiration at both ends of the floor, they are one of the NBA's elite teams.

3:08: They had another run late in the fourth quarter, when they cut the Bulls' seemingly solid 16 point lead (94-78) with 4:29 remaining down to a four-point deficit (96-92) with 1:21 to go. The highlights were Hughes driving to the hoop repeatedly (he drew a couple of fouls and made all the free throws) and LeBron's typical heroics (his layup, followed by a three-pointer, made it a four point game). Again, during that stretch, the Cavs were especially energized on defense; they forced Chicago into multiple turnovers, and kept the

Bulls off the offensive glass when they did allow the Bulls to shoot.

Hey, An Overpriced Free Agent That Danny Ferry Didn't Sign!: I never understood the fascination with Chicago's Ben Wallace, and I still don't understand it. Wallace received a four-year, $60 million deal from the Bulls last summer to patrol the middle of the United Center. Last night, he scored two points, pulled down two rebounds, and basically had zero impact on the game. While that was an unusually low performance for the big guy (and to be even more fair to him, his minutes were limited because of an apparent ankle injury that he suffered during the second quarter, although he did return later in the game), he is a near-zero on offense, and his defense is showing some holes as well (think back to the playoff series against Detroit last year; how many times did Wallace change the game?).

Then Again, Maybe They're Not Overpriced To Begin With: Marshall followed up his Cavalier-high 29 point game on Friday night with another solid performance, notching 12 points and 7 rebounds in 24 minutes of run. Five of those rebounds came on the offensive end. After slumping earlier this month, Marshall seems to have found his legs and is playing with renewed confidence.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

Normally, this space is reserved for several different elements of the game that caused my TV to get hit by thrown objects. (Actually, this is an exaggeration for literary effect. The only time I ever threw an object at my TV was after Marquis Grissom's deer-in-the-headlights miss of a routine fly ball during the 1997 ALCS, and that was at my old 21-inch set. No way do I throw anything at the big screen. My sphincter starts to tighten whenever any potential calamity is anywhere on the horizon, such as when my kids are rough-housing it ten feet away on the family room floor, or when my wife changes the channel to Lifetime. God did not intend for weepy chick flicks to be shown in 65 inch high def; that's why he made the 9 inch black and white set that tucks away under the kitchen cabinet.)

Today, I am not going to document the individual items that spiked my blood pressure. Lord knows, there were enough of them. The 24 consecutive points that the Bulls scored. The Cavs going ten straight minutes without a point. Gooden generally playing like he left his brain back in the hotel room (we'll definitely get to that rant another time; I will mention the one play when he had an easy rebound and dunk, but killed it by grabbing onto the rim with his off hand while he scooped the rebound). Snow's continued presence on the floor. Hughes thinking that he is a shooting guard, instead of a slasher who happens to play the shooting guard position. The continued and inexplicable uninspired play of Anderson Varejao.

No, today I want to focus on attitude. It's an attitude that FSO announcer Scott Williams kept pushing, and it's one that seemed to permeate the team. And it's one that I cannot stand.

It's the attitude that says that excuses are OK.

Several times, Williams hastened to point out that the Cavs' energy level was low because it was the team's second game of a back-to-back and their third game in four nights. Pardon my French, but what kind of bullshit excuse is that? Why is it OK for a team to give an uninspired effort (to be fair to the Cavs, they matched up well during the first half, and had those two flurries during the second half)?

Mind you, it was not as though the Bulls had spent the entire week breaking down game film and getting foot massages while they waited for the Cavs to arrive. The game was the Bulls' fourth in fifth nights, and the Bulls had played in a different country (granted, it was Toronto, which is sort of like America Heights; but I'm not shy about exaggerating to make my point) the prior evening. In other words, the Bulls' schedule in the past week had been even tougher than the Cavs. Not only that, the Bulls were without their glue in Hinrich. Yet they did not lay down or let up or adopt any kind of "woe is me" attitude.

If I go to work on a Friday and have a bad day, I doubt very much that my boss would like it if I blamed it on "working for a fifth consecutive day". I suspect his response would be that if I didn't like it, he could arrange it so I would have unlimited off days in a row. Why should the

National Basketball Association be different?

Let me be clear: I am not talking about skills here. I am not talking about luck. I understand that shots sometimes will not fall. I get it that sometimes the other guy does his job too; and no matter how many times you get a hand in his face, he still keeps hitting his shots.

What I am talking about is effort. Hustle never has to take a day off. Hustle never slumps. Hustle never has an off night, never gets injured, never needs to be rehabilitated, and doesn't need to take the bench for a breather.

Last night, I saw the Cavs stop hustling. I saw the Cavs sink into a mentality that it was OK to give a half-assed effort because it was their third game in four nights. I saw stupid turnovers, lazy passes, settling for long jumpers early in the shot clock, nobody under the offensive boards to get the rebound, and a general demeanor of wanting to be Somewhere Other Than Here. I then saw the Cavs pull out of it and almost get back in the game, which is good; but that heroic effort would not have been necessary without the indifference that had come before.

The NBA game is physically and mentally tough; no question about it. But the time for relaxing is on the trainer's table after the game or in the comfy reclining chair on the flight home. It's not when you have just taken a seven point lead and have the opponent on the ropes.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

San Antonio comes to The Q on Tuesday evening. The Cavs will then embark on their first West Coast road trip of the season, playing their next seven games away from home.