I'll tell ya what, I really enjoyed this game last night. It was a playoff atmosphere personified last night at The Q, and the Cavs held off the Spurs in a very physical and hard fought contest. Per usual, John Hnat checks in this morning with the recap, and you'll find no better game recaps anywhere. Either online or in print. End of story. THANKS JOHN!

THE SUMMARY:

The Cavs bested the San Antonio Spurs 82-78 in a game that, at least for three quarters, made one reminisce about the days of shooting into peach baskets at either end of the court, followed by a center jump after each basket. (Of course, “one” would have to be about 120 years old in this scenario.) The teams combined to score 42 points in the first quarter, 31 in the second, and 21 in the third. Yes, the score was 50-44 after three quarters. That's the halftime score of the average NBA game. (Halfway through the second quarter, if the Suns are playing.) I swear, George Mikan was playing center for the Spurs at one point.

LeBron James led the Cavs with 19 points, but the real story was Larry Hughes, who scored 13 of his 18 points in the fourth quarter (including three three-pointers). Damon Jones came off the bench to score 11, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas grabbed 13 rebounds. For the Spurs, Mr. Eva Longoria (she was in attendance last night, by the way) led the way with 26 points, and Tim Duncan had a Duncanesque 18 points and 15 rebounds.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

What It's All About: It was hard to not love the intensity of the game, the “playoff atmosphere” that makes announcers positively moist with joy. It's a cliché to say that “every possession counts” -- every possession DOES count, you ninny. But in a game like last night's, every possession really does take on additional meaning, because you're not going to get as many of them as you would in a typical Western Conference track meet. A prevalent concern for the Cavs has been that they play down to the level of inferior opposition – losing to Charlotte and Atlanta, needing a heroic comeback to beat the Celtics, et cetera. It is nice to see that the opposite can be true – that the Cavs can play with the NBA's elite.

Tightening The Screws: The defensive intensity that the Cavs displayed last night was exactly what they will need to make it to The Next Level. Eric Snow kept doubling on Duncan whenever The Big Fundamental got the ball in the post; time and again, he caused turnovers. Ilgauskas blocked three shots, including a crush on a would-be layup by San Antonio's Robert Horry. Anderson Varejao was his usual disruptive presence, drawing a charge from Parker and grabbing several rebounds. Coach Mike Brown has these guys playing good defense, and other than the occasional 113-point outburst (as was the case against New Jersey recently), it looks like 90 points will be good enough to win on a lot of nights. (Or 82, as the case may be.)

It's Not “Boo”, It's “Huuuuuughes”: On the offensive end, Hughes won this game for Cleveland. In the first two minutes of the fourth quarter, he hit two three-pointers, sandwiched around a pair of Varejao free throws, to erase an eight-point deficit. After the Spurs regained a 57-54 lead, Hughes then hit a third three-pointer to tie the game, and then earned a more traditional three-pointer (jump shot plus a free throw on the resulting foul) to put the Cavs up for good. For two quarters, the Cavs were searching for something to push them over the hump; Hughes provided the push when it was needed the most.

We Don't Need You, Superman; Jimmy Olsen's Doing Fine On His Own: Would you believe it if I told you that the Cavs came back from eight points down, and took a seven point lead, without LeBron scoring a single point? (And does the way that I phrased this question make the answer all too obvious?) LeBron is still The Man, but it is nice to see that the Cavs can do well (even against a quality opponent) with LeBron either on the bench or otherwise not being asked to put the team on his shoulders.

Let's Go To Our Correspondent In The War Zone, The San Diego Chicken: As professional sports teams provide ever more entertainment during breaks in the action, the possibility for those “entertainers” getting involved with the game itself increases. That brings us to the fourth quarter of last night's game. Furious that Varejao was not called for a foul for apparently sneezing on Duncan, San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich came flying down the court to confront the official responsible for the non-call. (Ironically, the replay showed that Duncan pushed off with his left arm; he was lucky that he didn't get whistled for an offensive foul.) Popovich almost collided with trusty Cavs mascot Moondog, who was setting up for whatever inane promotion the Cavs were running during that particular time out. The vision of an irate Popovich, veins bulging out of his neck (
I know this even though his back was to the camera
), almost crashing into a goofy-looking mascot ... I just wish I'd had a bowl of popcorn.

WHAT I DIDN’T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

He Sights It, He Shoots It ... No Good: The Cavs are killing themselves with their poor free throw shooting. They came into the Spurs game as one of the worst free-throw shooting teams in the league, and did nothing to help that ranking, making only 21 of their 34 shots (61.8%) from the line.

The Cavs are particularly adept at missing free throws when they seem to matter the most. For example, Hughes drained a three-pointer to tie the game at 52-52, and was fouled while shooting. His free throw would have given Cleveland its first lead since the first quarter. Sure enough – CLANG off the back of the rim.

Even worse, the Cavs made only six of ten free throws in the game's final minute, when San Antonio kept fouling in a desperate attempt to keep the game alive. The World's Greatest Shooter missed two, Hughes missed another, and LeBron missed one as well. Those misses helped to cut a nine-point lead with 53 seconds left into a three-point lead with four seconds left.

It's a given that if you are leading by less than ten with a minute remaining, the other team is going to foul you time and again and make you sustain that lead from the foul line. This is not the first time this year that the Cavs have faltered from the line in the final moments, and while it did not cost them the game last night, it also does not leave Cavs Fan with a warm and tingly feeling inside.

Candlesticks Always Make A Nice Gift: I would love to be a fly on the wall (metaphorically speaking; the closest “wall” would be Scot Pollard's ass) during one of Coach Brown's time-outs. I can only believe that it is a “Bull Durham”-style conversation of chatting about which gift would be appropriate for an upcoming wedding, or whether the rack on the babe in the red halter top in Section 123 is real or store-bought.
(Relax, guys. Don't rush back to the TiVo of the game to search for her. I made her up.)

I say that because based on the plays run after the Cavs call time out, they sure aren't using the break to diagram any plays. Look at the sequence of time outs that the Cavs called in the second quarter. They called one after the Spurs extended their lead to 27-21. On the ensuing possession, the Cavs passed the ball around the perimeter for exactly 23.5 seconds, leading Donyell Marshall to take a contested three-pointer from the corner as the shot clock expired. Genius, pure genius. As you could have surmised from my tone, Marshall's shot missed. Two more San Antonio baskets later, the Cavs called another time out. What did the Cavs run on the following possession? A pick and roll? A screen? A play for one of their big men in the post? No, they went to Old Reliable: “pass to LeBron and watch him dribble”. It is estimated that this play takes up pages 1, 2, 3, 8 through 20, 22, and 24 of the Cavs' 25-page playbook. LeBron's contested 20-foot jumper missed the mark.

The capper came with 2:38 left in the first half and San Antonio holding a 36-27 lead. After an official time out, the Cavs ran a play that ended with ... Snow taking a 20 foot jumper. Sorry, I can't even complete this paragraph. You can guess how that one ended.

[Insert Bakery Joke Here]: Yep, the Cavs were chock full of turnovers again, at least in the first half. San Antonio was able to take a ten point lead in the second quarter, and it was with the Cavs' help. Marshall was called for a three-second violation. Then a Hughes pass was stolen by Brent Barry. Then Hughes made another bad pass. Then LeBron had the ball stolen from him. Just like *that*, a tie ballgame became a ten-point deficit.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs will be in Boston tonight to take on the Celtics, who are 11-19 and would be last in the Atlantic Division but for the Philadelphia Odens. LeBron and Boston's Paul Pierce have had some epic matchups in the past; we'll see if they have another one tonight.