He's baaaack. After a well deserved week off to recharge the batteries, John Hnat is back this week, and buckled in for the stretch drive with his wildly popular Cavaliers game reviews. His second game back was a stinker. The Cavs used the convenient excuse of "we're tired from returning from the west coast", and produced a miserable effort in a 90-79 home loss to the Eastern Conference rival Orlando Magic ... who also had every right to be "tired". Blah.

**THE SUMMARY:**

The Cavs lost to the Orlando Magic, 90-79, yesterday evening. Not coincidentally, area hospitals reported a surge in the number of cases in which patients stumbled into the emergency room with feet smashed through the front of their televisions.

Perhaps the lone high point of the game for the Wine 'n Gold came midway through the first quarter. After Orlando took an early 15-6 lead (which was understandable, we were told, because the Cavs had returned the previous day from their seven-game, two-week West Coast road trip), the Cavs ran off ten consecutive points, spurred by a couple of buckets by Larry Hughes and a three-pointer by Damon Jones. Unfortunately, the Cavs could not sustain their energy (probably because they had just finished the longest road trip in NBA history) and Orlando scored 17 of the next 21 points to take a 32-20 lead early in the second quarter. The Magic extended their lead to 16 points (54-38) by the intermission.

The second half was not much better. The Cavs did show some life early in the third quarter, with Hughes hitting a couple more shots to cut the Orlando lead to single digits. But the Cavs (who were coming off a stretch away from Cleveland in which they played two games a day while opposing fans stuck them with spears) could not get any closer than eight points. By the middle of the fourth quarter, Orlando had extended its lead to 15 points, and the Cavs (who were exhausted, as they had just stepped off the plane after a horrendous road trip that saw them play games on every continent, including a heartbreaking loss to a squad of penguins at the South Pole) could not respond.

LeBron James had 18 points to lead the Cavs, and Hughes and Jones added 16 apiece. Grant Hill (who personally is the reason why socialized health care could never work in this country) led Orlando with 22 points, and precocious man-child Dwight Howard had 18 points and 13 rebounds to pace the Magic.

**WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:**

**Maybe It's A Squirrel?:** Drew Gooden, who still appears to be pasting a patch of roadkill to the back of his otherwise bald head, was about the only Cav to show any energy last night. He grabbed eleven rebounds, seven of them at the offensive end. Those seven offensive rebounds resulted in seven points for the Cavs. That total would have been more had the Cavs not forgotten how to hit free throws (whoops, that assumes they knew how to make them in the first place), as two of Gooden's offensive boards led to pairs of free throws in which the Cavs missed both shots (shocking, I know).

**Sounds To Me Like We Need Twelve:** Back in the day, I played softball for a local beer league team. The roster was almost evenly split with younger kids (like myself) and older veterans who actually knew how to play the game. One game, we were down by twelve runs with the fifth-inning mercy rule (the score needed to be within ten runs or else the game would be halted) approaching. That situation led to an interesting conversation between me and one of said grizzled vets:

GRIZZLED VET: What's the score?

ME: 14-2. We need two runs!

GRIZZLED VET: 14-2? Sounds to me like we need twelve!

I mention this to provide the context in which I've learned to enjoy Cavs' announcer Austin Carr. Whenever the Cavs are trailing (and that is far more often than we would care to see these days), Austin will pick some arbitrary target for the Cavs to meet on their way to eliminating the deficit. Last night, with the Cavs down by ten early in the second quarter, Austin said that “they need to cut it to two or three points by the half”. Do not ask why! Do not ask “hey Austin, if they're down by four at the half, should they pack it in and go home?”! Do not ask, “gee, Austin, what if they go on a huge run and lead by ten at the break; would that be acceptable?”! I don't know where Austin pulled this number from (actually I think I do, but it's a visual that I'd rather not have), but Austin does this all the time. And I have learned to love its arbitrary nature and its crawl-before-we-walk message.

Later, in the fourth quarter, the Cavs were trailing by double digits. In Austin's world, the Cavs had a clear mission: “they have to cut the lead to ten with five minutes remaining”. (Note that the Cavs actually cut the lead to only 13 with five minutes left. THAT's why they lost!)

I love A.C. Every time he opens his mouth, an unwitting gem falls out.

**Scot “Snail Darter” Pollard:** He got off the bench in the FIRST HALF last night. Yes, it

was only for a minute; and yes, he did not do much in that minute. (And yes, I am scrounging for positives from last night's contest. Let's stop making up warm fuzzies and get to the reasons why the glass is half empty.)

**WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:**

**"The Details Of Your Incompetence Do Not Interest Me:"** Maybe the Cavs need Mirand a Priestly to coach the team. Excuses should not only not be used; they should not be tolerated. Did you get the job done? No? Then I don't care why; all that I need to know is that you did not do what you were supposed to do. And that includes being tired after a road trip, which was used repeatedly to rationalize the team's poor effort.

Mind you, Orlando was playing its sixth road game out of the last seven. Many of those games were on the West Coast, with tough losses at Los Angeles and Phoenix. Like the Cavs, Orlando had also played games on both Friday and Saturday. So why is it that the Magic came out with energy? Why is it that the Magic's legs were fresh enough for them to make almost 55% of their field goal attempts (including five of eight three-pointers)? Why did the Magic have enough life in them to completely dominate the boards (43 rebounds to Cleveland's 31)?

To be fair, Coach Mike Brown and Eric Snow were both quoted as saying that the road trip was no excuse for the team's pathetic performance last night. I'm just not so sure that the rest of the team would have honestly agreed. Road trips are a fact of life in the NBA. Deal with it.

**The Larger Problem:** The larger problem ... ah, it's more like a series of problems, and we don't have enough space here to discuss them all. Let's break it down to two issues: the offense and the defense. (*Yeah, that doesn't leave much else.*)

On offense, the Cavs have regressed to the days of standing around for 20 seconds and then hoping that LeBron will wave his magic wand and make two points appear. The typical Cavs possession goes like this: inbound the ball; walk it up the court, so that almost half of the shot clock has already elapsed by the time the offense is getting set; maybe pass the ball around the perimeter a couple of times; stand and hold the ball until the numbers on the shot clock change to “shoot it now!” red; launch a shot and hope for the best. If they do happen to work the ball inside, then just hack them! Odds are that they will miss at least one of the resultant free throws.

Earlier this season, the Cavs were moving on offense much more often – setting screens, not staying stagnant for very long. Those days appear to be behind us. Not surprisingly, the Cavs' point totals keep going down. Taco Bell is in no danger of handing out those free chalupas any time soon.

On defense, which is allegedly the Cavs' specialty, the team's tendencies have been figured out and are being exploited. The Cavs do have good defense ... IF they are given enough time to set up. If not – if you can push the ball down the court – then you'll probably catch them on their heels and will get an easy hoop. (Or as alert reader Tom Oktavec put it, “grab the long rebound and Run, Run, Run against the worst transition defense in the league.”) The running West Coast teams – Phoenix, Golden State, Denver – torched the Cavs repeatedly by bringing the ball up quickly and getting an easy shot.

Even if the Cavs do get into their defensive set, there are ways to beat them. One of the Cavs' favorite tendencies is to bring out a big man to put pressure on the point guard at the perimeter. We've seen it time and again – the big guy steps out to put pressure on the point guard, while the Cav guarding said point guard will cut underneath and resume defense on the other side. It's a great strategy, except for two things:

1. It leaves the opposition's big man (the one that was being guarded by the Cav who steps out) wide open. Ideally, another Cav will rotate to cover him. Ideally, communism is supposed to work. In practice, neither one does.

2. The Cav big man who steps out will then run back (usually with his back to the ball) once he is done pressuring the ball at the perimeter. He practically becomes a fullback to the point guard's running back, and the point guard can follow the Cav big man right to the hoop. The ideal is to not only score the basket, but run into the back of the Cav big man to get the three-point opportunity.

Basketball is a game of tendencies. You'll have things that you like to do. The opposition will figure out what it is that you like to do, and will change so that you can no longer effectively do what you like to do. When that happens, you have to learn to like doing something else. Will the Cavs?

**WHAT LIES AHEAD:**

Whatever it is that is ailing the Cavs, the cure should come in the form of the Philadelphia Odens, who lug their 11-30 record (which is the worst in the NBA among teams that do not rhyme with “Shmemphis Shmizzlies”) into The Q on Wednesday. The two teams then travel to Philly for a return matchup on Friday.