This was the only pic of last nights game I could find that didn't want to make me vomit. The Cavs produced a stinker last night, being held to just nine points in the second quarter and getting outexecuted badly down the stretch ... losing at home to Da Bulls by a 84-78 count. In their defense, they were without Sasha, Z, and Damon. John Hnat recaps the game, as well as Danny Ferry shooting blanks at the trade deadline.

THE SUMMARY:

In the last two nights, the Cavs have played two close games against worthy conference opponents. On Wednesday night, they escaped Toronto with a one point win over the Raptors.

Last night, they weren't so lucky.

The Cavs fell to the Chicago Bulls, 84-78, last night at Quicken Loans Arena. The game was a defensive slugfest (is there such a thing?). Cavs fans in attendance had little chance of landing those free chalupas (provided by the Nameless National Quasi-Mexican Fast Food Chain), and even that tiny chance disappeared after Cleveland posted a 31 point first half (punctuated by a nine point second quarter).

Not surprisingly, the Cavs were down by double digits through much of the game; they trailed by 12 points at halftime, and by as many as 16 points early in the third quarter (at 51-35). Television sets throughout the land were being clicked from TNT (they televised the game nationally) to *American* Idol. But then the Cavs woke up, going on a 25-9 run to tie the game at 60 late in the third quarter.

The two teams traded baskets for a few minutes, and the score was still tied (at 68) when

Donyell Marshall nailed a three-pointer to give the Cavs their largest lead of the second half. The Bulls' Ben Gordon missed a shot, the Cavs rebounded the ball (not an easy feat for them; they got crushed on the boards, 52-40), and the resulting possession found Daniel Gibson wide open beyond the arc. He lined up the three-pointer … the Cavs crowd held their breaths, waiting to explode … the ball spun towards the hoop … and went in and out.

I have gone into such detail about that shot because it turned out to be the high point for the Cavs. Chicago went on a 14-2 run to take an 82-73 lead with just over a minute left. LeBron James drilled a three pointer and then made a layup with 31 seconds left to cut the lead to four, but the Cavs could get no closer.

James led the Cavs (who fell to 32-23 on the season) with 29 points, and Larry Hughes added 20 points (although it took him 26 shots to get there) and eight rebounds. Luol Deng paced the Bulls with 18 points, but the real leader of the Bulls was Ben Wallace, who came close to a triple-double with 14 points, 19 rebounds, and seven blocked shots.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

Adaptation: Give Coach Mike Brown credit for adjusting to the game. In the first half, he went with a conventional center-power forward-small forward front court, even giving Scot Pollard and Dwayne Jones some playing time. The Bulls' quicker players ran circles around the Cavs, and staked them to that double-digit lead.

In the second half, Coach Brown went to a smaller, quicker lineup. He benched Drew Gooden (actually, Gooden's uninspired play benched Drew Gooden) for good at 9:32 in the third quarter, and played LeBron almost exclusively at power forward for the rest of the game. From that point in the game, the Cavs outscored the Bulls by ten points (even including that terrible drought down the stretch). Brown has drawn some criticism previously for not changing along with the game, particularly in the second half, so it was nice to see him pulling the right strings.

"Fire The Spotter!": Here's a classic case of the announcer getting burned by the replay. In the third quarter, Chicago's Ben Gordon got called for a pair of fouls on very similar plays, as he ran into a Cavalier (first Daniel Gibson, then LeBron) as they attempted jumpers. In both cases, the Cavs made the shot and also tacked on the resulting free throw.

Later, in the fourth quarter, Gordon launched a jumper with Hughes defending him. Gordon fell to the ground after taking the shot. While the shot was still in the air, TNT announcer Craig Sager said that Hughes fouled Gordon, and was semi-incredulous when no foul was actually called. Sager continued to harp on Hughes' "foul" … until the replay clearly showed that Hughes never touched Gordon, and that Gordon fell to the ground only because he had wildly kicked his leg out in an attempt to draw contact.

I Have A Dream: The best part of last night's game? Seeing newly acquired point guard Mike Bibby take command of the offense. He pushed the pace, got other players involved in the flow of the offense, and drilled outside shots when the team needed them the most. He is exactly what the Cavs needed ...

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

I Have *Only* A Dream: ... and then I woke up. *(Is a dream a lie if it don't come true/Or is it something worse?)*

Let me be clear: I do not blame Cavs GM Danny Ferry for not getting a deal done, for Bibby or for any other player. More accurately, I do not have enough information to form a judgment. Neither do you, and neither does anybody else out there in reader-land. From all reports, Ferry tried his hardest to pry Bibby from Sacramento. It's possible that the Kings were unreasonable in their trade demands; maybe they asked for Varejao and Sasha Pavlovic (who incidentally missed last night's game with a bout of the flu) and Gibson and … you get the idea. Many commentators forget that it takes two to trade, and that you can't get Bibby for a "package" of Ira Newble and David Wesley.

But in not getting Bibby (or any other quality point guard, although Bibby was the best fit for the Cavs), Cleveland pretty much guaranteed themselves another year with a relatively early (i.e., first two rounds) playoff exit. They could get lucky and advance into the conference finals, but without a legitimate point guard, it's not likely.

Letting Them Off The Hook: Chicago did not play a good game last night. They shot 44% from the field. They turned the ball over an astounding 22 times. Several of their key players (Kirk Hinrich, Ben Gordon, Andres Nocioni) had their minutes severely limited because of foul trouble. They gave Cleveland every chance to win. *Take this game!* , they said.
We don't want it!
When the Cavs win games like last night's – games when they don't have their best stuff, but can still pull out the win – then we'll know that they have arrived. Looks like they still have a ways to go.

Droughts: Three periods of last night's game defined the Cleveland offense:

- The five minutes and 14 seconds in the second quarter that elapsed between a Donyell Marshall and the Cavs' next points on an Eric Snow layup;
- The five minutes and 15 seconds in the second quarter that elapsed between the Snow layup and the Cavs' next points, which came on a Hughes layup;
- The five minutes and 49 seconds in the latter half of the fourth quarter when the Cavs scored only two points (another Hughes layup).

What happened during those times of the game? You guessed it – the Cavs fell into their old pattern of LeBron and Four Guys Waiting For A Bus. Lots of standing around, little movement, and then hope that LBJ can bail them out with a heroic jumper as the shot clock buzzes.

Bear, Woods, Fiber-Rich Meals: Want to know one of the reasons the Bulls escaped with the victory? They made all 12 of their free throws, while the Cavs made only eight of their 16 attempts. Most of those misses were from James, who made only two of his eight attempts.

(As I have pointed out several times, LeBron is at his free-throw-shooting worst when he

stands straight as a board, with no bend in his knees. The previous two games, he did a very good job of consciously bending his knees before each free throw, and he made 18 of 22. Last night, he did not bend his knees at all, meaning that he could not get any of his lower body into his shots. That 2-for-8 line doesn't lie.)

This is not to say that the Cavs should have made all of their freebies; that's an impossible standard to set. But if they had made a few more, then the final minutes of the game are much different. Cleveland simply will not be a top team until they stop leaving so many points on the table.

The Final Countdown: Now you're going to have that height-of-cheesy-80s-arena-rock anthem going through your head the rest of the day. Aren't you glad you read this far?

Anyway, somebody is going to have to explain to me what Coach Brown was thinking in the final minute. As mentioned earlier, the Cavs cut the Bulls' lead to 82-78 with 31 seconds remaining. So the Cavs needed at least two more possessions to tie or take the lead. What did they do? They allowed Gordon to dribble, dribble, dribble away most of the 24-second clock, and then fouled him after the game clock had trickled down to 13 seconds.

In that situation, the Cavs have to foul, and foul right away. That's when the game comes down to free throws, and you have to put the pressure on the opposition to make theirs. Granted, Chicago did a terrific job from the line last night; but it still makes sense to keep sending them to the line and forcing them to keep making their shots. Even if the Cavs had forced Chicago into a shot clock violation or a turnover, they still would have had maybe ten seconds to score, get the ball back, and score a second time. When you're down by four points with 30 seconds to go, your options are pretty limited; but allowing the opponent to take 20 of those seconds off the clock gives you zero chance of erasing the lead. *Da-da-DA-da, da-da-DA-da-da...*

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs face the Miami Heat this Sunday. ABC executives are really loving life right about now, since their LBJ-Dwyane Wade marquee matchup has been shelved because of Wade's separated shoulder. Cleveland will then finish out February next Tuesday against Chris Paul and the Hornets.