The Cavs battled and battled last night, falling just short in a 95-92 loss in Dallas against the vaunted Mavericks on national television. LeBron James was brilliant with 39 points, but missed two open looks from three in the final seconds that would have sent the game to overtime. John Hnat relives the frustration in this, his recap of last night's loss to the Mavs.

THE SUMMARY:

The other day, I wrote this about the Cavs' chances against the Dallas Mavericks: "I'm merely hoping for them to maintain dignity." God, proving once again that He has a sick sense of humor, delivered exactly what I asked for … as the Cavs dropped an oh-so-winnable game to the Mavericks, 95-92, at Dallas's American Airlines Arena. What's that saying? *Beware of what you wish for, because you might get it?*
(For wisdom like that, you usually have to make your way through a plate of sweet-and-sour pork first.)

The Mavericks seemed like they were going to pull away from the Cavs midway through the second quarter. Taking advantage of the inevitable lull caused by LeBron James needing some rest and an understaffed Cavs bench (Larry Hughes and Damon Jones both missed the game with *flu-like symptoms*), Dallas opened a 14 point lead (46-32) with about four minutes remaining in the half.

Give Cleveland credit – they never allowed Dallas to pull away. They spent most of the third quarter trailing by eight to twelve points. When Dallas would threaten to make it a blowout, the Cavs responded with a basket to stem the tide (such as a knifing layup by LBJ to cut the lead to 62-50, or Anderson Varejao's layup moments later in response to a Dallas basket). Conversely, every time Cleveland seemed to get some momentum, Dallas found a way to score. (Not coincidentally, the Cavs had a gun pointed at their own foot throughout much of the game, with an apparently endless supply of ammo.)

Let's cut to the chase. A Donyell Marshall layup sliced the lead to five points (94-89) with less than two minutes to go. After Dallas' Josh Howard split a pair of free throws, LeBron drove for a layup and a foul. After he completed the three point play, Cleveland trailed by three. A steal by Varejao led to a LeBron fast break. He was fouled by Dirk Nowitzki, tumbled into the crowd, and came up grimacing and holding his back.

LeBron missed both free throws, but Shannon Brown ended up with the rebound. Ten seconds to play. With five seconds to go, LeBron lined up a three pointer for the tie. No good. The rebound was batted out to LeBron, who lined up a second three pointer with one second remaining. No good. Game over. No joy in Mudville tonight.

Despite his last minute misses, which will be endless cannon fodder for the "let's find the chinks in LeBron's armor!" crowd, James led all scorers with 39 points. Marshall added 14 in just under 20 minutes of playing time, and Sasha Pavlovic scored 11. Nowitzki just missed a triple-double, with 24 points, 11 rebounds, and seven assists.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

They're Miles Away From Being *This Close*: I spent the game trying to decide whether the Cavs are light years away from being a contender, or whether they just need a few tweaks (with a legit point guard being one of those "tweaks"). And I can't make up my mind.

For three quarters last night, the Cavs played decent, but the sense was that Dallas was just sort of letting them hang around. (The TNT announcers mentioned it several times; they could not believe that Dallas wasn't winning by much more.) But they shot well enough to stay in the game, and then made a run down the stretch. And they had the chance to send the game to overtime. Against a team that had won 12 in a row, was on its home court (where it has yet to lose this year), and is having an historic season.

More than once, I've said that games can be enjoyable even when your team loses. It's not total fun; of course it is better to win. But the fourth quarter of last night's game was fun to watch; and it gave Cavs fans a glimmer of hope that maybe their team can run with the biggest dogs in the game.

The Earnest Byner Award: Yes, LeBron missed two free throws and then two game-tying three pointers in the game's final seconds. Without LeBron, the Cavs would not have been within the same time zone as the Mavericks. As mentioned, he scored 39 points. Time and again, he slashed through the Dallas defense like a Ginsu knife going through that steel can. (Yet he remained sharp enough to slice this tomato!) Even with his last two misses, he finished at 17-of-27 from the field.

Perhaps more importantly, he manned up on Nowitzki in the final minutes. Nowitzki had scored 10 points in the first six minutes of the fourth quarter. His last points, coming on a pair of free throws, gave Dallas a 14 point lead (79-65). He was basically abusing Varejao and Marshall on defense. Then LeBron started covering him … and that was it for Mr. Nowitzki. Dirk did not score another point the rest of the game. Shutting down Dirk was paramount at that time; otherwise, Dallas would have run away with the game, and the Human White Flags would have gotten three or four minutes to burn.

There is plenty of blame to go around for last night's game. Putting any significant amount of it on LeBron's doorstep is selectively paying attention to only the last seconds, and ignoring

the 47 and a half minutes that came before it.

Well, He Does Seem To Like The Month Of March: We had a Shannon Brown sighting last night, and it was something more than garbage time. With the Cavs' already depleted backcourt being further hit by Pavlovic's foul trouble (he picked up his fifth foul near the end of the third quarter), Coach Mike Brown had no choice but to insert Shannon. (No, Shannon hasn't earned first-name treatment yet; he's getting it simply to avoid confusion between him and his coach.) Shannon responded with a couple of baskets (including a three-pointer), some scrappy defense (is there such a thing as unscrappy defense?), and an energy that was sorely lacking from some of his fellow buddies on the bench.

Coach Brown, could we maybe see a little more of Shannon, and a little less of some other guys (I have some suggestions; we'll get there in a minute), down the stretch? I'm talking about substantial minutes, not a "put him in the game until he makes his first mistake, then yank him out" trifling.

Danny Ferry: Yes, Danny Ferry. I admire people who have qualities that I do not possess, and Mr. Ferry obviously has oceans of patience where I have but a raindrop.

In the fourth quarter, with the Cavs starting to put some plays together, they got a rebound off a Jason Terry miss and pushed the ball for a fast break. The ball found its way into David Wesley's hands. Wesley had a clear path to the hoop. And … he missed the layup. No, hold on there. *Missed* does not do justice to what Wesley did. He banged the ball off the bottom of the backboard. With no defenders around him. The Mavericks collared the rebound, Terry hit a jumper at the other end, and the lead was back to a dozen.

Were I GM, I would have cut Wesley on the spot. I wouldn't have even waited until the end of the game. It would have taken all available restraint to wait till the next stoppage in play. And then I would have had the PA guy announce, "the Cleveland Cavaliers have just released

David Wesley." *And I would have made him pay for the plane ticket back home*.

To be fair, Ferry doesn't have the luxury of not having to live with the consequences of recommended knee-jerk decisions, like smart-ass Internet columnists do. Besides, I have the attention span of a two-year-old on Rit

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

The 26th Letter: Big guy, you have had a lot to deal with in the past three weeks … and you're playing like a guy who has had a lot to deal with in the past three weeks. If your head is in the right place, terrific; if not, it makes more sense to see Scot Pollard bang bodies until you're ready to return. And with what you've been through, no rational person would fault you for not being all there right about now.

Who Am I?: It's time to play Who Am I again! Although I can't hear you readers, I sense that you're cheering wildly (I'm thinking along the lines of a player picking the "Sing Along With Colin" category on MTV's old show *Remote Control*). (Bonus points if you can name the well-known comic who got his start on that show. No fair clicking on the link first. The test becomes awfully easy if you make it open book.)

Without any further ado, Who Am I? …

I was mentioned in pretty much every trade rumor involving the Cavs prior to last week's trading deadline. All that smoke didn't have a fire behind it, as I remained in Cleveland.

Since then, I have justified Danny Ferry's love with the following game lines:

- *2-5 FG, 0-0 FT, 4 points, 3 rebounds*
- *2-8 FG, 0-0 FT, 4 points, 9 rebounds*
- *4-9 FG, 0-0 FT, 8 points, 7 rebounds*
- *2-6 FG, 0-0 FT, 4 points, 6 rebounds*

My hobbies include watching bullfights (it provides lots of tips for my defense) and turning the occasional patch on the back of my head into a human Chia pet. Who Am I?

Coaching Dilemmas: We're full of audience participation games today! In this one, you get to play coach. You've been down by as many as 14 points, but have cut the lead to single digits with a few minutes to go. Most of that has been because of your star player. The other team has figured out your plan, and is now running two and three defenders at him every time he touches the ball. Because of this, other players will be getting open looks. Who should you play:

1. The rookie who is shooting 46% from three-point range; or
2. The veteran who is shooting only 40% from the field and has yet to hit a three-pointer this season?

If you answered B (Eric Snow), congratulations! You may get to walk an NBA sideline some day.

Understand this: I am not blaming Snow. He is what he is. Castigating him for missing jumpers is like getting mad at an untrained dog for peeing on the floor. He's doing the best he can; he's just not equipped to do it any better. In a grind-it-out game, he can play some defense, and he usually won't turn the ball over (although he had one hell of a "what was *that ???*
" pass in the first quarter). But if you need somebody to hit open jumpers, he would rank about 20
th
on the Cavs. (I would put Coach Brown, the assistant coaches, Amanda Mercado, and possibly Nicole! before Snow.)

Part of coaching is about putting in the right personnel at the right time – about evaluating the direction of the game, then responding in a way that improves your chances. Coach Brown did not do that … not by benching option A (Daniel Gibson) for Snow during much of the fourth quarter, when the Mavericks were practically triple-dog daring any other Cavalier to hit a shot. (It's unknown whether Dallas created a slight breach of etiquette by not going to the triple dare first.)

I Won't Do This Often, But…: Referees affect the outcomes of games a lot less often than you think. Besides, nobody ever said that referees would call a *perfect* game. All you can ask is that they call a *fair* and *consistent* game. I don't like whining about what the refs did or did not do, or how they jobbed your favorite team.

With that prologue, I have absolutely no comment on the blocking foul called on Varejao with 2:33 remaining, when Dallas's Terry plowed him over while driving to the hoop. More accurately, I have no comment that does not somehow refer to horse excrement.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Toronto Raptors will be in town Saturday night, looking for revenge for the narrow defeat that the Cavs handed them a couple of weeks ago. The Cavs will then host Houston on Monday evening.