The Q was ROCKIN' last night on St. Patty's Day ... as Benedict Boozer finally showed his face back in town after stabbing a blind man in the back two and a half years ago. The Cavs won their eighth straight by a count of 82-73, and Boozer even clanked two big free throws with the Jazz still alive with under a minute left. The fans were sauced up and ruthless, as was the Cavalier defense ... and this team is en fuego right now. John recaps last nights thrilling win.

THE SUMMARY:

As we all knew, Carlos Boozer's return to Quicken Loans Arena did not engender a friendly response from Cavs' fans. They booed him loudly; they booed him often. They serenaded him with any number of signs: *CARLOS LOOZER*, *TAKE THE MONEY AND RUN*, et cetera.

But after last night's game, which the Cavs won by a mark of 82-73, the real name for him is: Carlos Who? Although he had a fine game with 19 points and 14 rebounds, Boozer was largely outplayed by his replacement, Drew Gooden.

In the first half, the teams looked to be on the verge for a miracle cure for insomnia. Despite the normal Saturday-night buzz, the additional "hops" (yes, take it literally) from earlier St. Patrick's Day celebrations, and the buzz generated by Benedict Boozer's return to Cleveland (the last time he was here, he placed a knife squarely between the shoulder blades of a blind man), the crowd of 20,562 was falling asleep. At the half, the score was 32-31, Utah. That's more like an early-second-quarter score on most nights (or a mid-first-quarter score if you are in Phoenix).

As has been their tendency throughout their winning streak (which now stands at eight games), the Cavs really picked up their pace in the third quarter, scoring 29 points in the frame. They extended their lead to ten points (72-62) with a little over seven minutes remaining, then survived a Utah surge to emerge with the win (which increased their season record to 41-25, still two games behind Detroit in the Central Division).

LeBron James just missed a triple-double, as he scored 24 points, pulled down 17 rebounds, and had nine assists. Sasha Pavlovic backed him up with 21 points, most of those coming in the first half. Boozer and Mehmet Okur each scored 19 points to lead the Jazz.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

Here's Why They Won: When these two teams met in Utah last month, the Jazz slipped away with a one-point victory. The main reason they won that game was point guard Deron Williams, who torched the Cavs for a season-high 33 points. Especially in the final quarter of that game, Williams was driving to the basket almost at will. Larry Hughes and Eric Snow, who defended Williams for most of that game, were powerless to stop him. When Williams wasn't scoring, his penetration was leading to easy baskets for his teammates (he had 12 assists).

Last night was a completely different story. Thanks to persistent in-his-shirt defense by Hughes, Williams scored only 12 points (on 5-of-14 shooting), and dished out seven assists. Both of those figures were below his season averages (he was scoring 17 points and getting over nine helpers per game before last night).

Part of the credit goes to Coach Mike Brown as well. He did not allow Eric Snow to guard Williams much the entire game. Williams is small and very quick; in other words, he is exactly

the kind of player who gives Snow fits on defense. Coaching is largely about not putting your personnel in situations where they are likely to fail.

Mr. Final Four Minutes: I am starting to think that the Cavs should sit Zydrunas Ilgauskas until the final four minutes of the game. That's when he does his best work; may as well have him rested for it. Last night, with four minutes remaining, the Cavs had the ball and a very tenuous 73-69 lead. LeBron launched an errant three-pointer. That's when Z kicked it into high gear (yes, he has a high gear; it just looks like everybody else's second gear):

- Z tracked down the rebound from the missed shot, giving the Cavs another chance to score;
- Z then cashed in on that chance, as he hit a rather difficult turnaround jumper from the foul line;
- On Utah's next possession, Z forced Okur into a very tough fadeaway shot that missed the mark;
- A minute later, after Utah had trimmed the lead back to four points, Z hit one of his sweeping hook shots across the lane (one of those that allows Fox Sports Ohio announcer Fred McLeod to use his pet phrase, "rubber rim"; for the record, I am still concerned about McLeod's fascination with the term "rim");
- After Utah answered with another basket (making the difference four points yet again), Z drained a jumper with just over a minute remaining.

Z did not do that much the rest of the night – he scored only two other points (for a total of eight), grabbed a minuscule four rebounds, and turned the ball over thrice – but his performance down the stretch saved the game.

Mr. 48 (Well, Almost) Minutes: I already mentioned LeBron's stats for the game. Just want to make sure you all don't think I'm taking him for granted. (By the way, he had an off night last night. He couldn't hit an outside shot – or one from 15 feet, as we'll see later – with any consistency. When you put up 24, 17, and 9 on an off night, you're pretty good.)

Isn't Utah First In The League In Rebounding?: Answer: yes, they are. But the Cavs

trounced them on the boards last night, 61-41. The Cavs' 61 boards included 21 at the offensive end (that is Really, Really Good). LeBron led the way with his 17 rebounds (which was his best of the season and one off his career mark of 18 rebounds). (As much as I like his thunderous dunks, his long-distance shooting spurts, and his laser passes, I especially appreciate the way he can go head and shoulders above the rest of the tall timber to grab a key rebound.) Gooden had 12 boards, including seven on the offensive glass. Hughes had eight, which is terrific for a guard. Anderson Varejao and Donyell Marshall each came off the bench to grab seven boards. All of those extra opportunities on offense were the difference between driving home happy and driving home to kick the dog.

Moondog, You Have Some Competition: Late in the game, after Gooden grabbed yet another offensive rebound, he was fouled. After the whistle, he was standing with his back to the basket along the baseline, perhaps 15 feet from the hoop. Without looking, he flipped the ball over his shoulder. *Swish*. Yes, I know that it did not count. Yes, I know that he probably could not do it again if he tried a hundred times. I never said that it was difficult to amuse me.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

If It Had Been A Game Of HORSE, He Wouldn't Have Made It To "O": Yes, he played great defense against Williams, and he did grab some rebounds, but that's about all that Hughes did last night. He shot an abysmal 2-of-17 from the floor. That's his worst shooting performance of the season. (
Research Note: I didn't check this. It's possible that he may have had an even worse shooting night earlier this season. But that would require skimming over his game logs, and I like my eyes too much to make them do that.
) He was also responsible for six turnovers, including a double dribble violation, which is something you usually don't see unless your game ticket includes the words "Junior Varsity".

Hey, It's A Segue!: Speaking of turnovers, the Cavs surrendered the ball 19 times during the game, including 13 in the first half. Double dribbles, carries, traveling, offensive fouls, a LeBron pass to Joe Tait at courtside … if nothing else, the Cavs deserve praise for the variety of ways they discovered to give the ball back to the Jazz.

Fighting Molasses With Molasses: Early in the second quarter, Coach Brown had both

Eric Snow and Ira Newble on the floor. I had two worries:

1. That we were suddenly returned to the year 2004. I had to check the calendar to reassure myself.
2. That in a game where Utah was deliberately trying to slow the pace (they are not a team of thoroughbreds to begin with, and their legs were further deadened by having played three of the previous four nights), the Cavs were playing right into their hands by subbing in two of their slowest players.

Those substitutions slowed the pace of the game even further (see earlier comments re: insomnia cures), and had me flipping through other channels (I checked CNN for more details on the Samara, Russia plane crash ; when you've flown through that airport twice, bringing home your adopted children, you tend to pay a little more attention to the story).

I realize that Brown did not have many other options available. Daniel Gibson is still recovering from a toe injury. Damon Jones has been ineffective in recent weeks. But I don't quite understand why neither of those players was active for last night's game. (The last I heard, Gibson was healthy and ready to return.) I also don't quite understand why Shannon Brown, who has looked very good in several recent games, was chained to the bench. Coaching should not be about playing down to your opposition: you should WANT to create a mis-match for the other team. Your team is slow and tired? I'll put a team of athletes (LeBron, Sasha, Hughes, Varejao, Gooden/Gibson/Brown depending on how much size I'm willing to concede) on the floor. Let's see you do something about it. (By the way, Snow and Newble sat the entire second half. The Cavs outscored the Jazz by ten points in the second half. I do not see those facts as unrelated.)

Bear, Woods, Diet of Watermelon: Yes, it's time for the latest report on the Cavs' free throw shooting. This just in: they sucked. They shot 50% from the line, making exactly half of their 26 attempts. Hughes (who struggled from everywhere else on the floor, as noted earlier) missed all three of his attempts. Drew Gooden made only four out of his eight tries. And LeBron made just eight of his 13 attempts.

As I've noted quite often this season, LeBron has struggled with his form when shooting free throws. Usually, the problem is that he shoots his free throws very stiff and straight-legged; when he does that, then he is getting none of his lower body into the shot. Last night, he tried a different approach. Before every shot, he went through his usual routine of exhaling three times and then dribbling three times … and then he did a very exaggerated knee-bend. It looked rather awkward, and the results were certainly no more effective. He is about five

percentage points away from having teams go to a “Hack-A-Bron” strategy in the late minutes of close games.

My one wish for LBJ this offseason: find yourself a nice empty gym, pay some kid ten bucks an hour to retrieve the ball, and shoot hundreds of free throws every day. His free throw shooting, more than anything, is the reason why his scoring average is down this year.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs get today and tomorrow to catch their breath. They will then travel to Charlotte to start a stretch of six games in nine days against the Bobcats. (You’d better believe that there will be a Walter Herrmann update. Walter is fresh off a near-career-best 15 point game against the Clippers the other night, so he’s looking like he is going to bring his “A” game.)