The Cavs are on another streak

THE SUMMARY:

The Cavs are on another streak … alas, this one's heading in the wrong direction. After having their eight-game winning streak snapped at Charlotte on Tuesday night, the Cavs lost again, falling by a count of 98-90 to the Dallas Mavericks at Quicken Loans Arena. LeBron James was the leading scorer (yet again) with 31 points, and Drew Gooden had his semi-monthly good game, chipping in with 19 points and eight boards. The Mavericks had no shortage of heroes, as Dirk Nowitzki scored 23, Jason Terry had 21, and Devin Harris notched 17.

Cleveland bolted out of the gate, scoring the first five points of the game, and later extending their lead to as many as seven points. Curiously, LeBron did not get involved in the offense early on, allowing Gooden, Sasha Pavlovic, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas to put up the points.

That changed with three minutes remaining in the first quarter. By "changed", I mean "the Cavs decided to stop scoring". Over the next eight minutes, extending well into the second quarter, the Cavs made exactly zero field goals, and managed just two points from the line.

During this stretch, Cleveland missed 15 field goals (capped by Gooden blowing a dunk, with the ball flying high into the air) and turned the ball over three times.

That stretch was enough for Dallas to turn the seven point deficit into a nine point lead, a margin that they more or less sustained the rest of the way. They pushed the lead to as many as 15 points early in the fourth quarter. Led by James, the Cavs pulled to within six points a couple of times in the fourth, but they could not get any closer.

Dallas improved their league-best record to 56-11 with the win, while the Cavs fell to 41-27. Cleveland still has the second-best record in the Eastern Conference, but they are now only two and a half games ahead of the Bulls for that spot.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

Note: I am writing this section simply because I feel like I have to do it, in the same way that a child has to eat her vegetables, or that men of a certain age have to get screened for cancer (in a manner that will make any man swear to a lifetime of high-fiber foods and avoiding free radicals, if it means never having that test again).

Hey, Now He's Mr. First Four Minutes: In recent games, I've often singled out Ilgauskas for showing up in the final minutes of games. Last night, it was exactly the opposite – he had a very strong start to the game, then was basically ignored the rest of the way. But let's appreciate those first few minutes, shall we?

- On the first play of the game, Z caught the ball in the pivot, then kicked it out to a wide-open Pavlovic for a three-pointer;
- The next time down the court, Z caught the ball in the post again, then hit a turnaround jumper;

- On the next possession, he got the ball in the pivot once more, and this time swept across the lane with that quasi-hook shot (*it's a quasi-hook shot … it's a semi-hook shot … it's the Diet Coke of hook shots*) for two more points;

- A couple of minutes later, LeBron caught the ball on the right wing. As two Mavericks crowded him in, he hit a wide-open Z under the hoop with a bullet pass for a dunk.

Five minutes into the game, and Z already had eight points, staking the Cavs to a 13-8 lead. Fun while it lasted, I suppose.

It's A Bird, It's A Plane, It's… After Dallas pulled out to a 15 point lead (its largest margin of the game) early in the fourth quarter, LeBron put on his Superman cape and tried to carry the Cavs back into the game. He hit a three-pointer … then a layup … then another layup … and suddenly, it was an eight-point game, and the Mavericks were calling a time out. LBJ scored 17 of the Cavs' 24 points in the quarter.

Now that I think about it, he did his best work after smacking his head on the floor (the result of a collision with Dallas's Harris). I'd like to propose that the rest of the team smack their heads as well. It can't hurt their performance, and it would be rather cathartic for the fans to see.

About Freaking Time: Minutes played: Daniel Gibson, 18; Eric Snow, 5. Coach Mike Brown wisely went to Gibson in the second half after all other attempts to stop the lightning-quick Harris failed. (Harris was running a personal layup drill for much of the game.) Once Gibson was assigned to Harris, the layups stopped. The only points that Harris did score were on a "when did you call glass?" bank shot three-pointer to end the third quarter.

On a somewhat related note, when exactly did Shannon Brown take a dump in Coach Brown's office? That's the sole explanation I can see for Shannon losing all of his playing time.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

That Worked? Let's Put A Stop To That: As mentioned earlier, Ilgauskas got himself and the team off to a strong start offensively. The Cavs continually worked the ball inside to the big guy, and he either scored or passed it to a teammate for an open shot.

For reasons known only to himself and God, Coach Brown stopped running any plays for Z after the first few minutes. (Z scored only one more basket the rest of the game, and that came on a put-back of an errant shot.) Z is the only legitimate post presence the Cavs have. (Gooden's a nice player with a couple of post moves, but he's not exactly a dominating interior presence. On offense, Anderson Varejao evokes the grace of a young Chris Dudley. Donyell Marshall is a very good post player … there I go again, thinking it's 1999.)

The result? Lots of standing around on offense, lots of guys running into each other when they were moving around, and a lot of sinfully ugly possessions. If LeBron doesn't put the team on his back in the fourth quarter, the fans would have flooded the exits with several minutes remaining.

The best observation of the night came from ESPN's Bill Walton, who said that the Cavs are pretty much at a championship level defensively, but need to focus on scoring. Offensive sets like last night's are not going to get the job done. More accurately, offensive sets like the ones the Cavs used for the final 43 minutes of the game are not going to get the job done.

Put The Bong Down, Bill: Wait a minute. Walton saying that the Cavs have a championship-level defense wasn't that brilliant after all. Dallas shot 47% from the floor, which doesn't exactly scream "lock-down defense". More disturbingly, they continually got easy shots against the Cavs' defense (they had 25 assists for their 37 field goals). If it wasn't Harris or Jason Terry blitzing past Cavs' defenders to the hole, it was pick and roll plays leading to easy baskets.

The Larry Hughes Habitat For Humanity Report: Larry took a total of 20 shots on the evening, and bricked 12 of them (including a lovely 3-of-12 from the field). (Lost in all the buzz about the Cavs' surge since putting Hughes at the point guard is that Larry is shooting 37% during that stretch.) He has me mentally noting the possession as a missed shot whenever I see him pull up for a jumper. (Incidentally, that means he's ready for one of his 30 point games.)

Who Are We?: Time for another installment of this regular feature. So pay attention, as we ask, *who are we?...*

You thought that Larry Hughes belongs in the same sentence with the phrases "couldn't hit water" and "fell out of a boat"? He's got nothing on us! We hit only one of the 11 shots we took last night, and even that one was a fluke, the kind of shot that gets certain announcers red and tingly as they talk about "rubber rim jobs". For good measure, we also missed both of the free throws that we attempted. Who are we?

If you said "the Cavs' bench", you're right!

I won't belabor the point, except to say: Marshall strikes me as a guy who is simply collecting his paycheck these days. He camps out beyond the arc (where he is not that great of a shooter), rarely venturing into the land where you'd normally find 6-foot-10 guys. I do not know if he has lost his game, has lost his will to bang with the other giants, or is simply going through a slump; he is not helping the Cavs these days. Would it be possible to hook up one of those invisible fences at The Q, and have Marshall wear a dog collar that shocks him if he strays more than 15 feet from the basket? He's had his best games when he has shown some presence under the boards (at both ends); it's time for that guy to show up again.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs travel to New York to face the Knicks on Friday evening, then return home for a nationally televised game against Carmelo Anthony and the Denver Nuggets (or should that be Allen Iverson and the Denver Nuggets?) on Sunday night.