We should have seen this one coming. Second night of a back-to-back, check. Road game, check. Sub-.500 opponent, check. Opponent is the Knicks (who always seem to give the Cavs fits), check. Opponent is missing three key players due to injury and loses a fourth in the first quarter, check. Sounds like the recipe for a disappointing Cavs defeat. And the Cavs obliged, mixing those ingredients into a 97-93 loss to New York at Madison Square Garden. John Hnat relives the horra.

THE SUMMARY:

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The Knicks took the lead about four minutes into the second quarter, when a Renaldo Balkman layup gave them a 34-32 edge, and maintained their advantage through the fourth quarter. New York never really pulled away – their largest lead was nine points – but they also never allowed Cleveland to make the shot that would get them over the hump and back into the lead.

Let's fast-forward to the final two minutes. A Stephon Marbury three-pointer gave New York a 94-89 lead with a minute and a half to play. On Cleveland's ensuing possession, LeBron James missed a three pointer, and the hopes of Cleveland fans seemed to wither as the ball fell off the rim. However, Zydrunas Ilgauskas came down with the rebound, and kicked the ball out to Sasha Pavlovic, who hit his sixth three-pointer of the game to cut the lead to two.

New York missed a couple of attempts at padding its lead, giving Cleveland the ball with less than a minute to go. Ilgauskas faked a jumper from the free throw line, then drove to the hoop (he did! Really! You'll just have to believe me) and was fouled. He made the first free throw, but missed the second.

The backbreaker came moments later, as Marbury launched another three pointer with the shot clock winding down. The ball rattled around the rim, looked like it was going to squirt out, then fell through to give the Knicks a four point lead with eight seconds remaining. Coach Mike Brown called a time out, which he apparently did in order to make a post-game reservation at one of the Big Apple's finer restaurants, as the play "call" out of the time out saw the Cavs work the ball around the perimeter until Donyell Marshall missed a three pointer with time expiring.

LeBron had a tough night, but still managed 24 points, six rebounds, and seven assists. Pavlovic had 20, and Ilgauskas scored 18 (his fourth consecutive game above his season average). New York's Eddy Curry dropped 25 points, and Marbury and Channing Frye added 16 apiece.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

Maybe His Offense Really Is His Defense: Pavlovic had a terrific night from the field, shooting 6 of 7 from three-point range. Other than an "I called glass!" banked three-pointer in the second quarter, all of his shots hit nothing but net. The only disappointment is that Sasha took only eight shots for the entire game. When a guy is shooting that well, perhaps he ought to get the ball a little more often?

The Sacred Cow Just Got A Little Less Sacred: Larry Hughes was having a typical Larry Hughes night from the field -- 3-of-10 shooting from the field, including three consecutive misses in a little over one minute – when Coach Mike Brown pulled him. Because it was the middle of the third quarter, you might have thought that Hughes would return to the game at some point.

Well, you would have been wrong. Hughes sat the rest of the way. In Coach Brown World, that must mean that he was doing something wrong on defense, but the way he was killing the team on offense did not help matters. I give Coach Brown credit for not continuing to leave Hughes out there on a night when he just was not helping the team.

Hey, That's Two Nights In A Row!: Once again, the Cavs shot well from the free throw line, making 22 of their 29 attempts (or just over 75%). LeBron made 10 of 14; Ilgauskas, 6 of 7 (although the one shot he missed was the critical one in the game's final minute).

…The Moves You Don't Make: Seeing Jerome James lumber around the court for the Knicks made me really, really glad that the Cavs did not land him as a free agent during the 2005 offseason (he was mentioned as a possible target for the Cavs). It's not like GM Danny Ferry's moves that offseason have made him look like a genius – he paid star dollars for a very average player, shelled out $16 million for a guy who almost never plays, and dropped another $20 million for a guy who is playing like a guy who almost never plays – but at least he did not pursue James, whose entire resume is that he is big and tall.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

Way To Get Ready For The Playoffs, Fellas: As the lead-in to this column suggested, this game was one that the Cavs should have won. Earlier this week, the local media made much of a players-only meeting the Cavs held, and of their stated commitment to get serious now that the playoffs are approaching.

Maybe they need another meeting. They looked listless and distracted the whole game. Sure, it was the second night of a back-to-back … that did not stop them earlier this month, during their winning streak. As it stands, they have about three more weeks to figure out the issues and correct them, or else they will be working on their golf games a lot sooner than hoped.

We Know It Isn't The Cavs' Strength, But…: Despite Pavlovic's terrific night from the field, the Cavs as a team shot only 39% (31 of 80) from the floor. Go down the box score, and you'll see a lot of ugly numbers … Hughes, 3 for 10 … LeBron, 6 for 20 … Z, 6 for 16 … Daniel Gibson, 0 for 4 (maybe his new nickname should be "Jason Michaels").

This point may seem a bit strange after mentioning Ilgauskas among the culprits, but the problem is that other than the big Lithuanian, the Cavs have no interior scoring threat. At least, they have none that they are willing to use. (Gooden has some nice post moves, and LeBron is a beast in the post when he operates there, but neither one gets the opportunity very often.) Anderson Varejao is a great energy player, but is never going to be known for his offense. Donyell Marshall doesn't figure into this conversation, as he enters the paint about once every week.

The consequence of no interior scoring threat aside from Ilgauskas: teams play zone defenses against the Cavs, swarming to the ball on the perimeter, and daring them to push the ball inside. The result of that consequence (if that makes sense): the Cavs take a *lot* of outside shots, many of which they have no business taking. The result of that result: consumption of blood pressure medications in the Greater Cleveland area spikes way up on game nights.

Isn't *This* Supposed To Be The Cavs' Strength?: Cleveland got hammered in the rebound column, 48-35. After every missed Cavs' shot (and there were many), the ball was surrounded by white jerseys. And Cleveland did not box out particularly well on defense. In one memorable play, New York's Balkman outjumped LeBron for an offensive rebound, and then laid the ball into the hoop.

Ouch: The Knicks' Steve Francis turned his ankle badly on a drive to the hoop late in the first quarter and did not return. As basketball injuries go, his wasn't quite as squeamish as Shaun Livingston shredding his knee (view that one only if you're not the squeamish type), but it sure involved joints going in directions that they're not supposed to go. I sure hope his ankle feels a lot better than it looked.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

What was going to be an important matchup at Chicago this Saturday is now a critically important one, as the Cavs, at 43-29, are just a game ahead of the 42-28 Bulls in the battle for the second spot in the Eastern Conference. Be there at 3:30 PM this Saturday for the start.

Or at 3:50 PM, according to those of you who responded to yesterday's rant about my wife setting our alarm clock to be 20 minutes fast. Turns out that my wife is not alone in setting the clock ahead. Several of you wrote to say that you do the same thing, or have spouses that do.

I want to say this as kindly as I can, as you are dedicated and wonderful readers, but: you are nuts. Would you buy a scale that consistently added ten pounds to your weight, or a thermometer that always said the temperature is five degrees warmer than it really is? What good is a clock if you deliberately set it to the wrong time? Doesn't it get confusing trying to do math problems first thing in the morning ("the clock says it's 6:00 AM, but it's fifteen minutes fast … or is that fifteen minutes slow … meanwhile, a train leaves Topeka heading in the opposite direction at 40 MPH …")?

The ultimate solution would be a dual clock, one with two separate readouts for "real" time and "wife" time. I briefly Googled for such a device; no luck. I could find only those clocks that have several different time zones – one for New York, one for Paris, one for Hong Kong, etc., as though merely owning the device makes you unassailably cosmopolitan and worldly. Problem is, I'd need one that can handle both my time zone and the time zone on whatever world it is my wife lives in, and I'm not sure such a clock could exist.

Anyway, bottom line is that we'll meet up again this weekend, after the game on Saturday afternoon. See you then.