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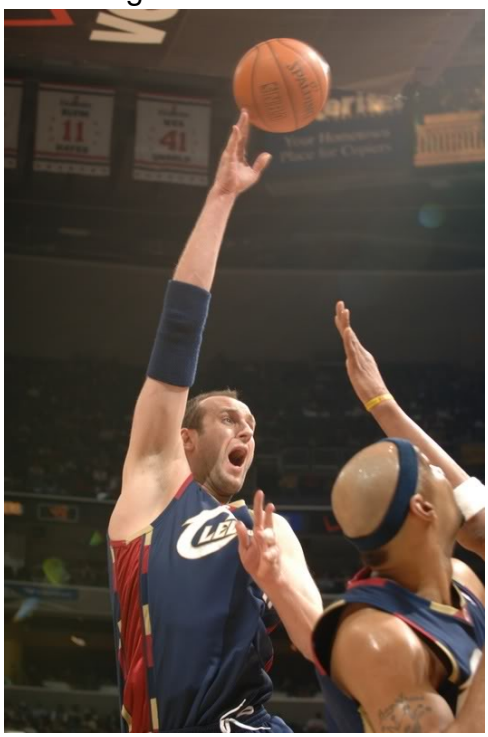

THE SUMMARY:

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In other words, the Washington Wizards had the Cavs exactly where they wanted them. And they almost shocked the Cavs, who played down to the level of their competition yet again. Washington held double-digit leads more than once in the game (that sounds more impressive than saying *"twice"*) and led well into the fourth quarter before Cleveland finally pulled away to win, 99-94.

The game was close in the first half; indeed, the lead changed 11 times during that time frame. The Wizards' Antawn Jamison carried his team, scoring 21 points in the first half alone.

Washington pulled away somewhat towards the end of the second quarter, scoring that last nine points of the quarter to take a 53-45 lead at intermission.

After halftime, Washington extended their lead to 10 points, and that seemed to finally wake the Cavs out of their slumber. They scored the next 11 points, setting off another round of Let's Pass The Lead Back And Forth. The lead would change seven more times (and the game would be tied five additional times, for good measure) until a pair of Larry Hughes free throws, which made the score 82-80, gave the Cavs a lead that they would not surrender. LeBron James scored ten point in the last two and a half minutes (including a resounding dunk after a baseline drive) to put the game away.

Despite a miserable 7-of-23 night from the floor, LeBron scored 25 points to lead the Cavs. (His five assists were also a team high, and his six rebounds were pretty close.) Zydrunas Ilgauskas had another strong game, shooting 8-of-13 from the field on his way to 18 points. Jamison finished with 27 points for the Wizards, who had a total of six players make it into double digits.

The victory pushed the Cavs' record to 46-31. Because the Bulls also won last night (they turned the New Jersey Nets into their own personal punching bags), the two teams remain tied in the standings. Unfortunately for Cleveland, Chicago owns the tiebreaker between the two teams (they have a 12-4 record in divisional games, while the Cavs' record in such games is 9-5; even if the Cavs win both of their remaining divisional games, they still will not catch Chicago). Accordingly, Cleveland will need to have a better record than Chicago to claim the second position in the conference.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

Just The Facts, Ma'am: A consistent two-part theme in this column is that:

1. The closer you are to the basket, the easier it is to make shots.
2. Therefore, especially when your team is struggling to score points, try to take shots that are as close to the basket as possible.

That's why the Cavs' typical M.O. of bombing away from long range whenever they fall into a funk causes about a 40 point rise in my blood pressure. And that's why this sequence of shots during the Cavs' third quarter comeback from a ten point deficit makes me want to sing with joy:

- Sasha Pavlovic, two free throws after getting fouled while driving to the basket;
- Ilgauskas, a layup that missed;
- LeBron, missed three pointer (I didn't say that their shot selection was *perfect*);
- Ilgauskas, an offensive rebound and dunk off the James miss (*see, he was just setting up the big guy*);
- Drew Gooden, a dunk off a nice feed from LeBron;
- Gooden, a fadeaway jumper;
- Ilgauskas, another dunk as a result of a sweet James pass.

And that's how you score. (Especially when you don't have anybody who can consistently hit from outside. But that's another topic for another time. Say, eight paragraphs from now.)

Ira: Put yourself in this position. You've dreamed all your life of playing in the NBA. You've worked your tail off to make it happen. You played college ball at a respectable school, but not one of the major NBA player production lines. On draft night, your phone never rang. You kept working, opened a few eyes, and got your break. You bounced around the league for a few years, with no real job security, until you finally received a long-term deal from a team. Immediately, said team was roundly criticized for giving you a long-term deal. Those critics said that you're too slow, not athletic enough, not a good enough shooter, and not a lot of other things … as though it's your fault that somebody handed you millions of dollars.

Fast forward four years. You're now an almost-invisible man. Your career allows you to do what you love to do for a living … but your circumstances are that you almost never get to do it. It's like a punishment devised by one of the gods with a sicker sense of humor. You've been through some painful injuries. You play so seldom that mail at your home is starting to

arrive addressed to “Ira Newble, DNP-CD.” , When you do make it into a game, you draw the ire of those whom you want to cheer for you. Your contract runs for one more year, and when it’s up, you know that your chances of getting another deal are approximately zero. You’re 32 years old, in a profession where 32 year olds are over the hill.

No, I don’t shed tears for Ira Newble. But I do appreciate the difficulties of his situation. And that’s why it is particularly great to see Ira have a good game. Last night, Ira hit both of the three-pointers he took, scoring nine points overall. At least as importantly, he grabbed two offensive rebounds in the final three minutes of the game (*that’s right, he was in the game when it really mattered*). One of those rebounds led to the James dunk previously described; the other resulted in a put-back attempt and a pair of free throws.

I’m not going to lobby for Ira Newble in the starting lineup, or even in the main bench rotation. He is what he is. But what he is, is a veteran who can stay ready and help his team win on a night where most others can’t get the job done. Last night, that’s exactly what he did.

On The Top 10 Plays Of The Day List, This One Should Be Around #6: Cavs trailing, 76-74, with about nine minutes remaining in the game. Washington’s DeShawn Stevenson missed a jumper. Donyell Marshall tracked down the rebound along the baseline, took a step, and heaved a court-length pass. A cry of “what are you doing?” went up from living rooms scattered throughout the greater Cleveland metropolis. But Marshall knew what he was doing – LeBron had leaked downcourt after the shot, pulled in the pass like he did as a wide receiver at St. Vincent-St. Mary (
so this is what it is like to be Fred McLeod
), and dunked the ball. And with that, a chorus of “great play, Donyell!” went up from living rooms scattered throughout the greater Cleveland metropolis.

The Streak Is At Seven: That’s right. The Cavs’ improbable streak of drawing praise for their free-throw shooting is now at seven games. Why? Because they made 29 of their 37 attempts (a 78% success clip), including 15 of 19 in the fourth quarter. (Granted, that wasn’t *quite* as good as their performance the previous night against Miami, but 100% is kind of difficult to top.) Maybe more impressive is that they made it to the line 37 times (in contrast, Washington shot only 22 free throws the entire game).

For those keeping track, the Cavs are now six percentage points ahead of Miami at the cellar of the NBA’s free throw shooting statistics (Cleveland is at .697; Miami, .691). It would take quite a flurry to catch the third-worst team (Orlando, at .703), but it is not out of the

question. More significantly, the Cavs are finally succeeding at a vital component of playoff basketball, just in time for the playoffs.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

It's Not Supposed To Be A Three Act Play: The Cavs' offense last night followed their usual three-part script:

ACT I: LeBron Who?: The team runs its offense mainly through Ilgauskas, and makes a concerted effort to get the ball in the hands of everybody other than LeBron. Indeed, LBJ usually acts as though the ball carries the Mutaba virus, hiding in one corner while his teammates work the ball around the other half of the court. This act usually ends with the Cavs holding a lead, or at least not losing by much.

ACT II: The Waiting For The Bus: LeBron starts taking over the game. All too often, his teammates take that as a sign to stand around while LeBron dribbles, dribbles, and dribbles some more. The offense stagnates, and the seemingly inevitable dry spell (where the Cavs will not hit a field goal for what seems like an entire half) will leave the Cavs trailing, often by double digits.

ACT III: The Fire Drill: At some point in the second half, the alarm goes off for the Cavs. They realize that they are about to piss away yet another game. They start playing inspired defense, often creating turnovers that lead to easy breakaway hoops. They drive to the basket relentlessly, drawing plenty of fouls and resulting in lots of free throws. LeBron plays like the superstar that he is. And they come back.

The drama is in the timing. If Act III begins early enough, then the ending is a happy one. If Act III is delayed too long, then the play ends with the opponents raising their arms in glory and the "Cleveland" jersey being buried under a pile of dung as the curtain is lowered.

Not sure about you, but I've gotten tired of this play. When you know that the team is capable of an Act III-level performance, and that Act I is pretty good as well, then you'll never be happy with Act II.

Speaking Of Threes, The Cavs Can't Make Them: As a team, the Cavs were 2-of-9 (22%) from three point range last night; if you remove players named "Ira Newble", they laid an 0-of-7 goose egg. LeBron missed all three of his attempts from long distance (and by my count, all three of his attempts were the "lean back to the left and fire away" variety, the kind that he almost never makes).

Marshall also missed both of his attempts. Donyell used to be blackjack from behind the arc – he wouldn't make it half of the time, but he was pretty close to that. Continuing that analogy, he is now the Lotto of three-point shooting. There's a chance that he will hit, but now it is a surprise, rather than a regularly recurring event. When he spots up, I automatically scan under the basket, to see if any Cavs are in position for the offensive rebound.

Department Of Completely Unrelated Whining: As Prince once sang (and as the Beacon-Journal's excellent Brian Windhorst noted in his blog), sometimes it snows in April. That doesn't mean that we want it to, especially when we're going to run a half-marathon in a few hours. But I've made it 37 years by telling myself that this weather build character; one more day of lying to myself won't hurt. (Besides, without this weather, how could we get an absurd Indians game in which they string out four-and-a-half-minus-one-pitch innings over four hours, only to call the game?)

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs have one more tough road game, in Detroit against the Pistons, on Sunday afternoon. Then they'll finish out the schedule over the next two weeks against New Jersey and Atlanta, at Philadelphia, and against Milwaukee.