With the Bulls losing yesterday, the Cavs had a chance to seize back the #2 seed ... but could not, falling 87-82 in Detroit. In today's recap, John says that despite the fact this game was tied late, the outcome was never in doubt. And the inconsistencies of the Cavs play and Mike Brown's ever changing rotations continue to be maddening.

THE SUMMARY:

Is it possible for a game to never be in doubt despite being close throughout, even tied in the final minutes? If it is, yesterday's game was it. Cleveland had a two-point lead over Detroit with three minutes remaining, and was tied with 1:42 to play, but the outcome was as scripted as anything that ever came out of Hollywood. The Pistons scored the final five points of the game, and that was the margin of victory in yesterday's 87-82 defeat at The Palace of Auburn Hills.

The loss dropped the Cavs' season record to 46-32. Fortunately for them, Chicago also lost yesterday, meaning that the two teams are still tied in the standings, and still tied in the race for the all-important second seed in the conference (although Chicago does own the tiebreaker between them, should both teams finish the season with the same record).

As usual, LeBron James led the Cavs with 20 points (also as usual, the Pistons held him well below his scoring average) and six assists. Drew Gooden added a double-double with 10 points and 12 rebounds. The Pistons' Rip Hamilton led all scorers with 21 points, and Antonio McDyess added 18. (Interesting fact: All scorers for both teams scored in double digits.)

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

Not much; and nothing that is going to motivate me to write a quippy little lead-in. I appreciated that they came back from a 14-point deficit early in the second quarter (although Detroit was an accomplice, as they allowed Rasheed Wallace to keep jacking up three-pointers, and they allowed Flip Murray to enter the game). I liked how they kept the game close, and were in a position to win it in the final minutes. I liked seeing Gooden continue to be a presence on the boards, and Zydrunas Ilgauskas continue his trend of shooting well from the field. I even liked the Cavs' free-throw shooting (although two late, critical misses by LeBron prevent it from being an overall positive).

I cannot get excited about any of that. Once again, the Cavs were in a position to win a game that they Had To Win. (That cliché may be one of the most over-used and poorly-used ones in sports. By definition, you don't "have" to win any game unless losing the game means that your season ends. But it does sound better than a game that they Didn't Technically Have To Win, But It Would Have Made Their Lives Easier If They Had, so we'll stick with it.) Once again, the Cavs fell short. This morning, I don't feel like handing out gold stars for a good effort that fell short. So let's get to…

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

Paging Dr. Jung: In one psychological sense, there's no such thing as an accident. The events that happen do so because you want them to, whether consciously or subconsciously.

I'm not about to put the entire Cavs' team on the couch and have them tell me about their childhoods, but it was no accident that they didn't get the job done virtually every time they had the opportunity to tie the game or take the lead. (They spent most of the game trailing Detroit, and held the lead for only a couple of minutes out of the entire contest.) Consider:

- The Cavs fell behind relatively quickly in the first quarter. They did hold a three point lead (at 5-2), which would be their largest lead of the entire game. But after trading the lead a few times, Detroit went ahead 10-9, and eventually extended that lead to 14 points;
- The Cavs fought back and regained the lead at 37-36 when Zydrunas Ilgauskas made a layup. That lead lasted all of 20 seconds, as Detroit scored consecutive, rather easy baskets on an McDyess dunk and a Tayshaun Prince layup;
- Cleveland took the lead again early in the third quarter, when a Larry Hughes jumper put them ahead, 49-48. This time, their lead lasted an entire 31 seconds, until Chauncey Billups buried a three-pointer;
- Detroit held the lead for the next quarter and a half, until the Cavs tied the game at 78-78 on a Hughes jumper. On their next possession, Ilgauskas buried a jumper for an 80-78 lead with just over three minutes to go. This lead lasted for 15 full seconds, until Billups tied the game with a baseline jumper;
- With the game now tied at 80, Cleveland went to its usual offensive set: let LeBron dribble the ball while four other guys with "Cleveland" on their uniforms watch him. With the shot clock about to expire, James was still some 25 feet from the basket, and he was forced to launch a three-pointer to beat the clock. It missed, Detroit rebounded the ball, and Billups hit another jumper to make it an 82-80 Pistons lead;
- LeBron made two free throws to knot the game at 82, with 1:42 remaining. Cleveland would not score another point.

In Friday night's game against Washington, the Cavs seemed almost reluctant to take the lead – they trailed for most of the game, and barely caught the Wizards in the final minutes. When they did get the lead, they didn't know what to do with it – no additional defensive intensity, no smart shots on offense, nothing to suggest that they wanted to actually keep the advantage. I

saw that same brand of reluctance yesterday. They need to get over it quickly, or else their season will end somewhere around April 30th.

DEEEE-TROIT BAS-KET-BALL!: That's the sing-songy, rather annoying catch phrase that Mason, Detroit's arena announcer, chirps every time the opponent surrenders the ball on a turnover. The Cavs heard it so often yesterday, it will haunt their nightmares for some time to come. Cleveland turned the ball over 16 times, which is not a terrible number, and is actually pretty good considering that they gave the ball to Detroit 14 times in the first half. Those first-half turnovers prevented Cleveland from taking any kind of substantial lead (see previous paragraph re: not wanting to take the lead), and eventually cost them the game.

(In the Department of Not Much Consolation, at least Cleveland did not have the game's dumbest turnover. Detroit's Rasheed Wallace and Linsday Hunter combined for that one on an over-and-back violation in the second quarter, when Wallace inbounded the ball to Hunter as Hunter was crossing from the frontcourt into the backcourt).

A Rotation Of Five: With four games remaining in the regular season, and the playoffs looming, the Cavs' rotation is in shambles. The entire Cavs' bench played all of 45 minutes yesterday, and combined for 11 points, three rebounds, and one assist.

Last year, Coach Mike Brown drew some criticism for mechanically bringing Donyell Marshall and Damon Jones into games halfway through the first quarter. It didn't matter if Ilgauskas had just made five shots in a row, or if Eric Snow was looking like a real NBA point guard – at the first stoppage in play after the 6:00 mark, Marshall and Jones took their places.

That looks like basketball paradise compared to now, in which Jones almost always gets DNP-CDs, and Marshall gets just a few minutes to show that he is playing like a guy who wants to get DNP-CDs. Boob … er, Daniel Gibson gets a few minutes here and there, but his job is to stand behind the three-point arc and look pretty. He's never given much of a chance to handle the ball or otherwise impact the game, so his stat lines are binary code (lots of 0s and 1s). Scot Pollard and Ira Newble get isolated minutes here and there, but they are essentially end-of-the-bench filler at this point in their careers. That leaves Snow (who is on the bench mainly because Coach Brown finally had to concede that he was killing the team as a starter) and Anderson Varejao (who is a nice energy player with a limited offensive game).

It's not all bleak. Varejao and Marshall really elevated their games in the postseason last year; hopefully they can fish in that particular lake one more time. But right now, you'll have to excuse Coach Brown if he curls in the fetal position every time he tells one of his bench troops to pull off the warm-ups.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The Cavs get a few days off to rest up for the New Jersey Nets on Thursday evening. Games against Atlanta on Saturday night, and then at Philadelphia and against Milwaukee the following week, will end the regular season. The Cavs need to win all four to match last season's 46-30 record … and they'll probably need all four to have a chance of regaining the second slot for the

upcoming playoffs.