Annnnnd we're off! The Cavs got the playoff party started right on Sunday afternoon, toying with the Wizards for three quarters before blowing them out late for a 97-82 win. John Hnat has been our guy all year on the Cavs beat, building a strong following with his witty and insightful game wraps. He's at his best here with his synopsis of game one ...

THE SUMMARY:

In a game that seemed more of a coronation than a contest, the Cavs defeated the Washington Wizards, 97-82, earlier this afternoon at Quicken Loans ("Can We Interest You In An Adjustable-Rate Loan?") Arena.

LeBron James led the scoring with … whoops! So much for cut-and-pasting that section from an earlier column. Larry Hughes paced the Cavaliers with 27 points, while LeBron added 23 and Zydrunas Ilgauskas had 16. Washington's Antawn Jamison led everybody with 28 points, and Jarvis Hayes added 18.

Cleveland trailed only once in the entire game (the Wizards' Jamison scored the first two

points to provide a short-lived 2-0 lead), but did not really put the game away until the fourth quarter. They initially looked like they were going to blow Washington out of the arena, bursting to an 11-4 lead (thanks to a couple of baskets by both LeBron and Drew Gooden). But Washington charged right back (including a four-point play by Hayes), trimming the lead to one.

The next three quarters continued in that fashion – Cleveland would push the lead out a few points, occasionally into the double digits; but Washington would then roar right back. In the second quarter, a Hughes three-point play extended the Cavs' lead to 34-24; a couple of Jamison baskets later, that lead was sliced in half. Later in the quarter, Donyell Marshall drilled a three-pointer to give Cleveland a 40-31 lead. Within a minute, an Antonio Daniels jumper and a DeShawn Stevenson three-pointer made it a four point game.

In the third quarter, a Hughes fadeaway gave the Cavs a 52-43 lead. The Wizards' Hayes personally cut that lead to two points. The crowd at The Q was getting audibly restless. Washington continued to keep the game close (they trailed by only seven points, at 74-67, after three frames, and got as close as six points early in the fourth), but eventually ran out of gas. A 13-4 Cleveland run (with nine of those points coming from Ilgauskas) put the game out of reach and allowed the home crowd to face the post-game traffic with smiles on their faces.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

Let's Make Coach Brown Happy: As you probably know already, the quickest way to Coach Mike Brown's heart is through a defensive stop. By the boxscore, the Cavs made Brown happy no fewer than 50 times, as they held Washington to 29-of-79 (37%) from the field. They became particularly stingy during crunch time, limiting the Wizards to 5-of-20 shooting during the fourth quarter. Give Brown credit for running more double-teams at Jamison (who launched an Arenas-like 27 shots and made only 10 of them) in the later stages of the game. If they can hold teams to 82 points, they'll win a lot more than they'll lose.

Getting To The Line: The Cavs shot 39 free throws. That is huge, as it suggests that they were not merely content to play HORSE from 20 or more feet. LeBron and Hughes drove to the basket early and often, and Ilgauskas repeatedly received the ball in the post. Take the ball to the hole, and good things happen.

Doing Something From The Line: 30 of those 39 Cleveland free throws found their way to the bottom of the net. That is also huge, given the Cavs' troubles at the line through so much of this past season. When Hughes is perfect from the line (he made all eight of his attempts), you know you're having a good day. (LeBron and Z also did well, making 9-of-11 and 8-of-10, respectively. They balanced out Anderson Varejao, who Ben Wallaced his way to a 3-of-8 performance.)

You Want Knuckleballs? Go Find Phil Niekro: Hughes buried several outside jumpers en route to his 27 points (he shot a healthy 9-of-17 from the floor). His jumper, which so often flutters like a knuckleball in a wind tunnel, was very accurate (as it has been for the past week or so). He did occasionally fall into the trap of mistaking himself for a three-point shooter, but most of his shots were the pull-up mid-range jumpers that he can make regularly. If the Cavs would just rig him with a remote-controlled shocking device, used whenever he tries to bomb from long range ("Hughes dribbles to the three point line … he pulls up for *BZZZZZZZT* "), then we'd really have something.

Giving Me Yet Another Reason To Link To An Earlier Column: Last week, I wrote a column about Dual Action Cleanse, Klee Irwin's lasting contribution to Western society. (That column also described, almost in passing, the game in which the Cavs dismantled the Hawks.) I described their Web site's Live Chat feature, in which helpful DAC associates presumably are only too ready to help the rest of us realize just how full of crap we really are, and lamented my inability to catch the site at a time when the feature is enabled. (We'd suspect their employees take more bathroom breaks than the rest of us, no?)

Anyway, I promised to continue trying. I have to report, sadly, that I have still not been able to catch them at a convenient time. The feature has been unavailable every time. So I will have to continue waiting to submit my questions (such as "I've had a patch of hair inexplicably

growing on the back of my head for almost a year; will your product help it disappear?”).

Speaking of recent off-topic subjects in this space (*note to new readers: this space often bears at most a passing resemblance to a Cavs basketball column; really, how often can I write “they need to move around more on offense” before you all get bored?*), I have to relay a story that continues my “I Hate Waiting” theme (*another gratuitous link!*). This one takes place at a local drug store (its initials are CVS). I found myself in line at the store’s only open register. The woman at the counter was attempting to buy three bottles of Tylenol. She had four coupons for the three bottles. (*Coupons. That should have been my sign to drop my items and run screaming from the store.*) The cashier tried to explain to her that she could use only one coupon per item.

After a few rounds of tense back-and-forth (US-Soviet arms reduction talks were simple by comparison), our antagonist reached to the candy rack, grabbed the cheapest bar she could find, placed it on the counter, and demanded that the clerk try to scan the coupon again. This time, the system allowed all of the coupons (*joy!*).

And that brought us to the next circle of this particular hell: Paying For The Purchases. The total bill came to $2.47. How does our friend pay it? *With a spork ing CHECK.* I assume that CVS has some minimum-amount policy for checks … but that the clerk consciously ignored it, realizing that she’d be throwing away another fifteen minutes of her life otherwise.

I guess retail shops and me do not mix. I’d better use the Internet for all purchases going forward. If I am dying and need some critical medicine within the next few hours to save my life, I will still order it online and take my chances. Better to exit this trough of mortal error in my own home while waiting for the Fed Ex guy, than to sound the death gurgle while twitching on the floor behind some customer who wants to pay for his entire purchase in pennies.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What does “CVS” stand for, anyway?

WHAT I DIDN’T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

Water Seeking Its Own Level: OK, class, put your books under your desks. It’s time for a pop quiz. No fair looking at your neighbor’s paper. Here’s the question:

What are the defining characteristics of the 2006-07 Cleveland Cavaliers?

If you answer correctly (which is to say “if you have the same answer as me”), then “playing to the level of their opponent” would be at or near the top of the list. On the plus side, it means that Cleveland usually hangs tough against the NBA’s elite teams (sweeping the season series against San Antonio; beating Detroit once and being reasonably close in a couple of losses; almost beating the near-invincible Mavericks at home, where they are really-truly-near-invincible).

On the minus side … it means losing to some God-awful teams (Charlotte twice, Atlanta, Boston) and making a lot of other games closer than they should be. That’s exactly what the Cavs did today. They let Washington (a significantly lesser opponent without their injured stars Gilbert Arenas and Caron Butler) stay close well into the fourth quarter, before they finally snuffed out the Wizards’ hopes for an upset.

Can Water Both Stand And Seek Its Own Level At The Same Time?: We’ll give credit for another answer to that question: the Cavs do not move particularly well in the halfcourt offense. They often use a 1-4 set (that’s my attempt to move up the Brian Windhorst food chain of basketball fans), in which one player (either a guard or LeBron) dribbles at the top of the three-point arc while the other four form a conga line across the court, roughly at free-throw-line depth.

Players will move from one location to another along the line, but none of those cuts really lead to scoring opportunities. (Other than a sweet pass from Z to a cutting LeBron in the game's opening minutes, I can't remember a single "wow, that was *niiice* " pass by the Cavs the entire game.) Usually within a quarter or so, the players relax on the whole cutting thing, and stand around while James dribbles (what insiders call the "LeBron And Four Guys Waiting For A Bus" set).

While they did not do too much standing around today, and they did at times work the ball inside (as mentioned earlier), they still had the uncomfortable look of a guy wearing shoes two sizes too small. (Then again, they did win by 15. *My wallet's too small for my fifties, and my diamond shoes are too tight!*)

The Court Is 94 Feet Long For Most, 70 For A Few: Last time, I praised Marshall for his interior play (the lack of which has been a constant source of "What I Didn't Like"s this season). I suggested that maybe he was rounding into form in time for the playoffs.

Well, here are two facts about Donyell's performance that tell you pretty much what you need to know:

- He was 1 of 3 shooting from the field;
- He was 1 of 3 shooting from three-point range.

The offensive paint is so foreign to him, he has to show his passport whenever he enters it. Actually, let's not put this one entirely on Donyell's shoulders; the coaching staff needs to get their 6'10" power forwards closer to the basket, where they belong. The times he has played closer to the hoop, he has shown some nice post moves and the ability to grab offensive rebounds. It's sad to not see those strengths being used.

That's What An Entire City Sounds Like When It Holds Its Breath: Eight minutes remaining in the third quarter. LeBron rises high for a jumper from maybe ten feet away. He lands on the foot of Washington center Etan Thomas, rolling his left ankle. He crumples to the arena floor, in obvious agony.
Goodbye, playoff hopes
, was the thought on the minds of Cavs fans everywhere.

Fortunately, LeBron picked himself up, hobbled to the bench for a team timeout, then continued playing. *Whew.*

Not A Big Deal, Just Curious: At every nationally-televised game in Cleveland over the winter months, the announcers almost enthusiastically noted how frigid/snowy/windy/generally sucky the Cleveland weather can be, complete with overviews of frozen Lake Erie or a snow-covered street or whatever. Today, it's a gorgeous 70-plus degree spring day … and nada.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The series against Washington continues on Wednesday evening, when the two teams play again at The Q. It will then shift to Washington, as game 3 will take place on Saturday afternoon at 5:30.

Remember: TheClevelandFan.com will be hosting a gathering at Panini’s this Saturday. (Ostensibly, the gathering is for that little selection party the NFL holds every April; really, it's for the Cavs game.). If you're in the greater Cleveland area this Saturday, don't watch the game by yourself on the 27-incher in your family room. Head down to Panini's, meet a roomful of fellow Cleveland sports fans, and have a great time watching (dare I say it?) another Cavaliers victory. (The festivities start at 9:00 AM; see the linked article for full details.)