Bottom line ... it's been 15 years since it's been this fun to be a Cavs fan. The team has won nine straight contests and hasn't lost a game in over a month. And thanks to a gritty 81-77 win over the Nets in game one, they are now three wins away from a berth in the Eastern Conference Finals. The Anti-Branson, John Hnat, checks in with the full 411 on yesterday's thrilling start to the Cavs-Nets series.

THE SUMMARY:

When the Cavs won their last game of the regular season, paving the way for them to earn the second seed in the Eastern Conference, many observers felt that the team had just been handed a ticket to the conference finals.

So far, the Cavs are making those observers look brilliant. Cleveland topped the New Jersey Nets, 81-77, giving them a 1-0 lead in the best-of-seven series. The victory was Cleveland's ninth consecutive win; they haven't lost a game in a month. (You could look it up; their last loss was against the Pistons on April 8th.)

LeBron James, fighting off the ill effects of what was apparently the Mother Of All Colds (ABC

covered this "story" very thoroughly; I half-expected announcers Hubie Brown and Mike Tirico to discuss the contents of LeBron's used tissues), came close to a triple-double. He scored 21 points (tops for the Cavs), pulled down 11 rebounds, and handed out seven assists. Larry Hughes added 17 points, and Drew Gooden posted a 14-point, 14-rebound effort. New Jersey was led by Vince Carter's 21 points, while Richard Jefferson tallied 16.

The game was very close the entire way: the largest lead that either team held was New Jersey's eight point advantage (33-25) midway through the second quarter. After one quarter, Cleveland led by three points (23-20); at halftime, the lead was down to two (43-41); and by the end of three quarters, the game was all knotted at 59 apiece.

Down the stretch, James and Hughes were the difference, as each scored five points in the final minutes. LeBron's drive and jumper with 19 seconds remaining provided the final margin of victory. On their last possession of the game, and needing two scores to at least tie the game, New Jersey did the Cavs a favor by not shooting until seven seconds remained. As a further favor, they had Bostjan Nachbar take that shot, while LeBron was draped all over him. LeBron blocked the shot; and while New Jersey was able to recover the ball, Jefferson's three point attempt as time expired would not have mattered even had it gone in.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

It's A Recurring Feature Now: One of the Cavs' defining characteristics: they rebound the ball. They trounced Washington on the boards in every game of the opening round series, and they continued that trend against New Jersey yesterday, outrebounding the Nets by a 51-37 margin. Most of that edge came on the offensive boards, as Cleveland grabbed 20 offensive rebounds to New Jersey's nine. As a result, Cleveland had nine more field goal attempts (87 to 78). Somewhere in those extra opportunities came the four points that made the difference.

It May Win Championships; It Definitely Won Game One: Defense, that is. Cleveland

held the Nets to a “we got winners!”-league level 37% from the field. They particularly gave Carter fits, holding him to 7-of-23 shooting. (From appearances, Carter complained to the referees about each of the sixteen misses. To be fair, the refs allowed a level of physical play that would have been more at home for, say, Iwo Jima. On one three-point attempt, Carter was knocked down by a charging Pavlovic, but the refs just let the game continue.) The Cavs also held New Jersey star Jason Kidd to 2-of-11 shooting; alas, that number may say more about Kidd’s level of accuracy at this juncture in his career than it does about Cleveland’s defense.

The Squirrel Growing Out Of His Head Is Not Slowing Him Down Any: Maybe it was the five days of rest since the series against the Wizards. Maybe his reverse soul patch gets more powerful as it grows longer. Whatever the explanation, Gooden was very active yesterday. His 14 rebounds tied Zydrunas Ilgauskas for the team high. One particularly noteworthy play: with five minutes to go, and Cleveland leading 71-69, Hughes missed a three-pointer. The rebound careened towards the left sideline, where Gooden tracked it down. He then drove towards the lane, and delivered the ball to an open Hughes, who shot another three-pointer. *Swi sh* . Cavs lead, 74-69.

Well, Look Who’s Back: In the series against Washington, Sasha Pavlovic pretty much disappeared. I noticed his vanishing act (which doesn’t really make sense now that I think about it), giving it a couple of paragraphs in my last column .

Five minutes into yesterday’s game, it looked like Sasha was on his way to more demerits. First, he fumbled a ball out of bounds, despite no apparent pressure from any New Jersey players. Moments later, he found himself under the Cavs’ basket with the ball. He tried to put the ball in, but was faced by New Jersey center Jason Collins. The Cavs’ bench was already clearing a seat for Sasha’s seemingly inevitable return.

That’s when Pavlovic showed the kind of resilience that will keep him in the starting lineup. He drove past Jefferson for a layup … then a couple of minutes later, drilled a three pointer … then repeated the same sequence (layup, then three pointer) in the second quarter … then added a dunk on a fast break for good measure. Pavlovic finished with 16 points while

shooting an efficient 6-of-11 from the field.

Sasha, You Now Owe Me Fifty Bucks For Singing Your Praises Twice: Sasha also had the play of the game, one that was good enough to justify its own column section. With a minute and a half remaining in the game, and Cleveland nursing a 77-73 lead, Hughes brought the ball upcourt. A heartbeat later, Kidd was breaking towards the New Jersey basket with the ball, and the Cavs' lead was almost certainly going to be cut in half.

Not today, said Pavlovic. He raced from Kidd's blind side to swat Kidd's layup attempt into the first row. Although New Jersey retained the ball, and eventually did score on the resulting possession, Pavlovic's block kept the momentum from swinging entirely in the Nets' favor.

How did Kidd magically end up with the ball, you ask? Hopefully, you saw it for yourself (*in which case, why exactly are you asking me?*
). I'm not quite sure. The play-by-play says that Hughes threw an errant pass; given Larry's tendency to share the wealth with the guys in the other jerseys, it's certainly plausible. The reason I don't know is that my five-year-old son picked this exact moment to tell me that Thomas the Tank Engine has three sets of wheels, while Edward has four. And in the instant that it took me to turn my head and advise him that the last two minutes of a playoff game represent a suboptimal period of time for garnering paternal attention about imaginary trains (to the casual ear, it sounded a lot like "that's great, son, now can you get Daddy another beer?"), Kidd suddenly had the ball.

(For those of you without small boys, Thomas the Tank Engine is the toy empire that has a hammerlock on the wallets of parents throughout the land. By my estimate, the budget of the average American family with a three to six-year-old boy breaks down something like this:

- 25% - Housing
- 15% - Food, clothing, other basic necessities
- 10% - Car payment, gasoline, insurance, etc.
- 5% - Entertainment
- 5,826% - Thomas trains, tracks (there are at least three different types, none of which

work with each other), clothes, puzzles, games, books, videos, utensils, personal grooming products, bedding sets, and the like. I wouldn't be surprised if there were a Thomas pregnancy kit ("if Thomas peeps twice after you pee on the stick, then you have a little Really Useful Engine on the way!").

The amazing thing about all of the Thomas stories: each and every one of them contains a crash, accident, or other calamity. I don't know what kind of a shop Sir Topham Hatt runs. Although he is always portrayed as the eagle-eyed overseer of his trains, I suspect that he's really lighting cigars with hundred dollar bills while his trains fall off tracks, slam into each other, and otherwise undermine the little remaining confidence in the Island of Sodor's rail system. Apparently, regulations on Sodor are a mite lax; it seems to me that *Thomas Meets The National Transportation Safety Board* is way overdue.

Alternatively, Thomas could haul a few carloads of lawyers to Sodor; that would get Sir Topham Hatt to clean up his act *tout de suite*. We are indeed fortunate to live in America, where a dry cleaner losing a customer's pair of pants can get them on the wrong end of a $65 million lawsuit. The best line in the article:

The customer, Roy L. Pearson Jr., who has been representing himself, declined to comment.

My takeaway point from this sentence is that "the word 'jackass' is not in Roy L. Pearson Jr.'s vocabulary; hence he could not comment." Bear in mind that Mr. Pearson is not just any old lawsuit-happy shyster attorney (*paging Mr. Roget…*); he is a *sitting judge*. To think that people still ask me why I left law…

I am not exactly sure how we ended up here from a starting point of "Sasha Pavlovic blocked a shot." I think I'll cut bait now.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

No Sherwin-Williams Ads Today: That's because the Cavs spent almost no time in the paint on offense. A few token post-ups by Gooden and Ilgauskas, and one or two by LeBron. That's it. As mentioned earlier, they did have plenty of offensive rebounds, several of which led to easy put-backs, but that's not exactly the same as running plays designed to get the ball close to the basket. Not surprisingly, Cleveland shot a very pedestrian 40% from the floor (including such rim-bending performances as LeBron's 8-of-21 shooting, Hughes's 7-of-20, and Ilgauskas's 4-of-12).

New Jersey's defensive strategy seemed to have them playing either man defense or a 2-3 zone, collapsing towards any Cavalier (usually LeBron) who tried to drive to the basket, and daring anybody (usually the Cavs not named "LeBron") to make an outside shot. It almost won them Game One. Unless Cleveland adjusts, that strategy could well win Game Two for the Nets.

A Side Effect Of No Sherwin-Williams Ads: When you don't push the ball inside, choosing instead to launch jumpers from outside, then you also do not get to the free throw line very much. Sure enough, the Cavs shot all of 11 free throws the entire game. (By comparison, LeBron alone averaged more free throw attempts per game during the Washington series.) One could argue that the Cavs were trying to avoid the embarrassment of having to shoot free throws, as they were a brickilicious 6-of-11 when they did toe the line.

Neither The Chicken Nor The Egg *Wanted* To Come First: Is Coach Mike Brown not playing his bench because they aren't productive … or is the bench not productive because Coach Brown isn't playing them? Whatever the case may be, the bench did not provide much help in Game One. Here's their combined line: 39:56 played, six points scored, 3-of-8 shooting (including 0-of-3 from three point range), no free throws attempted, eight rebounds, four assists. All five of the Cavs' starters logged at least 35 minutes; Hughes and James were

both on the court for more than 45. (And Ira Newble's string of token appearances ended, as he stayed on the bench for the entire game.) You cannot fault Coach Brown for leaving his best players out there; but we can only hope that the extended minutes do not lead to tired legs later in the series.

Hey, ABC Cherry-Picks Stats Too!: During the third quarter, ABC flashed a graphic showing that LeBron has had more playoff games with at least 30 points, 45 minutes played, nine rebounds, and five assists than … well, I presume it puts him in a class with only Oscar Robertson, since *every* LeBron-oriented statistical comparison ends up there. I can kind of understand 30 points as a cutoff – nice round number, definitely an indicator of scoring ability. But *nine* rebounds? And *five* assists? Very arbitrary. Seems to me that a producer for ABC wanted to find some way to say that "LeBron is a unique player," and that's the best his production assistant could do.

ONE LAST OBSERVATION THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE GAME, EXCEPT THAT ABC PLUGGED IT DURING THE TELECAST:

Coming To Netflix Around, Say, June 10: That would be *Knocked Up*, which appears to be the worst movie in … well, days. Boy meets girl; boy and girl … well, you know; girl gets a bun in the oven; boy and girl end up together, with laughs and light life lessons for all. (The real lesson may be: hey, Katherine Heigl, crossovers from TV to movies rarely end well.) I don't envy TCF movie critic Mitch Cyrus for this one.

But I have to say that this movie would be a better date activity than watching the Floyd Mayweather-Oscar de la Hoya fight. I mention this because a friend of mine had an ex-boyfriend call her out of the blue last week, inviting her to a fight party this past Saturday. (The call may not have technically been completely "out of the blue" – I believe they had talked

once or twice in the prior few days – but that fact gets in the way of my story, so I shall ignore it.)

Now, some of you might think that this approach will cause women to swoon. I suspect that our own fight doctor, Scott Swerbinsky , proposed to his wife while ringside at a Mike Tyson fight (" *and as he knocked out yet another no-name stiff in the first round, I got down on one knee … and with the no-name stiff's blood splashing around us, I asked for her hand in marriage"*). Generally, though, that's a recipe for a lot of Saturday nights with the guys at the Gas 'N Sip.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

Like you don't already know. The Cavs keep playing the Nets until the NBA sends one of them home. Here's the schedule:

- Game 2: at Cleveland, Tuesday (5/8), 8:00 PM
- Game 3: at New Jersey, Saturday (5/12), 5:00 PM
- Game 4: at New Jersey, Monday (5/14), 7:00 PM
- (if necessary) Game 5: at Cleveland, Wednesday (5/16)
- (if necessary) Game 6: at New Jersey, Friday (5/18)
- (if necessary) Game 7: at Cleveland, Sunday (5/20)

(Nothing like chewing up a couple of column inches with information easily available on NBA .com .)