What a win last night for the Cavaliers. After storming out to a 20 point lead in the first half, the Cavaliers came close to blowing it in the second half as the Nets came back to within 1 point and made it a game. But, that was as close as it would get, and Daniel Gibson and Donyell Marshall were the heroes of the night hitting several huge shots. Hnat chimes in with his thoughts on the game, touching on the Cavs fast start last night, his imaginary mailbag, some great personnel changes by Mike Brown in the 4th quarter, and more. It's onto the Eastern Conference Finals and a date with the rival Pistons, and it all starts Monday night at 8pm at The Palace!

THE SUMMARY:

Conventional wisdom says that you can watch the final two minutes of each half of a basketball game and know what happened. OK, conventionally wise people, that means that very little of note happened between the end of the first half (when the Cavs had a 15 point lead) and the end of the game (which saw the Cavs win the game by 16 points), right?

Maybe not.

After surviving a disastrous third quarter that saw New Jersey trim a formerly 22 point lead to one, the Cavs regrouped and turned the tables on the Nets, blowing the game wide open with a 19-4 run in the fourth quarter en route to an 88-72 victory. The win gave Cleveland a 4-2 series win over the Nets, and earned them a spot in the Eastern Conference finals for the first time since 1992. (So me perspective:

LeBron James was seven years old at the time.)

LeBron paced all scorers with his 23 points. He threatened to notch a triple-double, as he also had eight rebounds and eight assists.

Donyell Marshall fired his way to 18 points in as many minutes of playing time,

and Drew Gooden added 16.

New Jersey's Jason Kidd came even closer to a triple-double than did LeBron:

he had a team-best 19 points, 12 rebounds, and eight assists.

Richard Jefferson and Mikki Moore had 16 and 14 points respectively.

In what could have been his last game in a Nets uniform, Vince Carter had a disappointing 11 points (only two in the second half).

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

No Slow Start Here: The Cavs were aggressive early and often in the first quarter, when they stormed to a 32-15 lead. Driving to the hoop early and often, Cleveland scored 10 points on five layups and added eight more on free throws.

They looked to run - off turnovers, off missed shots, even off made shots.

The Nets did not seem to know what to do; the Cavs had kept this side of their personality hidden until then.

They picked a good time to unveil it.

Looking Like A Superstar ... At Least For A While: LeBron's M.O. often has him shooting rather seldom in the opening minutes of a game, as he focuses instead on getting shots for his teammates.

That's certainly the approach he took in Game Five, when he shot only twice in the opening stanza, and scored but two points.

I am thinking that he watched the tape of that game and said "enough of *that* ," because he dominated the game in the first quarter.

He scored 14 of his 23 points in those first 12 minutes, grabbed four rebounds, and was a holy terror on the fast break.

He had the air of a superstar, of a guy who is going to put his team on his back and take them wherever they need to go.

When LeBron plays like that a little more often, then there will not be any debates about him being omitted from any end-of-season NBA awards.

From The Imaginary Mailbag:

D*ear John,*

Re: your last column , when you said "My guess: he'll be chained to Coach Brown's bench for the rest of the playoffs, and will then face a soul-searching offseason," I would like to say:

And the horse you rode in on.

Humbly yours,

Donyell Lamar Marshall

About all I can say in response is: Nice of you to provide the gratuitous link, Donyell.

Actually, Marshall's game last night was not that much different from most of his other games - he waited at the three-point line long enough to be cited for loitering, then bombed away once the ball found its way to him. The difference: last night,
his shots actually went in the hoop
.

(Stunning analysis, no?)

Of his 11 shots, Donyell launched all but one of them (or 10, for those of you with "The Diff"-level math skills) from beyond the arc; six of them found the net.

But 18 points in 18 minutes is Really, Really Good; and when three of those shots came during the critical blow-the-game-open stretch of the final quarter, it is Really, Really,
Really
Good.

It's Gotta Be The Hair: Gooden, sporting a new take on his reverse soul patch (the patch is now wider and thinner, which tells me that he has stretched the squirrel carcass to its limit gotten it trimmed), had one of his incredibly efficient offensive performances. Eleven shots attempted, eight shots made. The "turnaround jumper" was working ... the "face-up jumper" was working ... and the "dash to the hoop, dunk with two hands, then hang on the rim an extra second to prove your indescribable manliness" was working.

When Gooden showed up at Game Five with his shorter hair, I was concerned: y ou never want to change anything when you are going well.

Sure enough, Drew put up all of four points in that loss to the Nets.

His performance created a very real worry that he is a modern-day Samson, a man whose incredible power is sourced from his hair.

(That begs the question of how powerful Drew would be if he grew a full helmet.)

Not to worry, as Drew had a fine game last night with his 16 points and seven boards.

He even had the chance to play some air guitar during a New Jersey timeout.

It's Not Working? Let's Change It: Give Coach Mike Brown credit for changing the personnel for the fourth quarter.

He sat the underperforming Larry Hughes and Sasha Pavlovic, and instead played Daniel Gibson and Damon Jones.

(In the latter case, he had to blow an inch of dust off Damon prior to putting him in the game.)

Both played the entire fourth quarter; both did well.

Gibson's driving layup early in the quarter staked Cleveland to a 64-60 lead,

More significantly, it was a wake-up call - a way for him to say to his teammates,

"let's try driving the ball again and see what happens."

Moments later, after a Moore three-point play cut the Cavs' lead to one, Gibson hit a huge three-pointer to push the lead back to four.

(He would make another three-pointer later in the quarter.)

As for Jones, his line is not terribly impressive; he missed the one shot he took, grabbed one rebound, and had a couple of assists. But he provided tough defense on Kidd, which was vital in the wake of Kidd's 12-point third quarter.

This postseason has to have been difficult on D.J.

Until last night, he had played a total of one minute in the preceding nine playoff games.

That probably is not why he decided to sign with Cleveland two summers ago.

But he stayed ready and prepared, and gave the team a lift when they truly needed it.

The Austin Carr Reverse: Nobody in the broadcasting biz can turn on a dime, analysis-wise, quite like A.C. With approximately 10:06 remaining in the third quarter, A.C. said that the Cavs "cannot rely on outside shots."
That sentence was still hanging in the air when Zydrunas Ilgauskas buried an 18-footer.

On cue, A.C. praised big Z, saying "that's his shot."

God bless ya, big guy.

We also have to take a moment to discuss the A.C. Literal Untruth, another staple of his work. A minute after his flip-flop regarding long shots, Gooden drained a jumper to make the score 57-42. Gooden's hoop had followed a basket by Kidd at the other end of the floor.

Austin almost wet himself in his emotion, saying that "you don't want to get into trading baskets."

Hey, Austin?

When you have a fifteen point lead, trading baskets is a
terrific
strategy.

It's when you're
trailing
that it does not work so well.

He may be heavy, but he's our A.C. We wouldn't have him any other way.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

Looking Like A House Plant ... At Least For A While: After his 14 point initial quarter, James did not score another point until halfway through the
fourth
quarter.

Some of that lapse was caused by James's foul trouble; LeBron had to become a spectator for the final seven minutes of the third quarter after getting tagged with his fourth foul (his third of the quarter).

Even when he was playing, he wasn't playing
well
.

He did not have the same intensity and drive of those opening minutes, typically settling for outside jumpers.

It's Working? Let's Change It: James's pattern was echoed by his colleagues, as they decided that driving to the hoop was a bad idea.

I think I can prove it with two statistics:

- In the first quarter, the Cavs shot 13 free throws. (They didn't do it *well*, making only eight of the freebies, but at least they got there.);
- In the final three quarters combined, the Cavs shot five free throws.

Ye gods.

We'll Go Easy On Him Tonight: Larry Hughes's line: 1-of-6 shooting from the floor, 2-of-4 from the line, three rebounds, and three assists in just under 35 minutes of action. His body language is screaming, "help!

I can't find my jumper!"

He still has his moments of taking "what are you thinking?" shots, but now he is also passing up ones that he actually should take.

Larry, this team is gonna need you to step it up in the next series. Give it a try, OK? (To be fair, the one thing he is providing is effort.

With just under five minutes to go in the second quarter, Hughes sprinted after a loose ball, preventing it from going out of bounds, and eventually leading to a Gooden jumper.)

Maybe He Was Dreaming Of His New Air Guitar: In the opening minutes, with the score tied at two apiece, Kidd threw an alley-oop pass to Moore that went right behind Drew's head. At no point during the life of the pass did Gooden betray any knowledge that the ball was near him.

Had Drew his head, he would have had a basketball lodged in his nose, kind of like the badminton shuttlecock in those Vitamin Water ads.

Way to stay alert, Drew!

Incidentally, I am convinced that the main ingredient in Vitamin Water is crack. I drink one, and I *immediately* want about six more.

They don't need to advertise; they simply should hand out samples like they were candy.

The Garden State Fell Asleep: Granted, Game Five did not suggest that Game Six would be an all-time clash of the gods, but it is still a potentially season-deciding playoff game. So New Jersey fans, I ask you:
why didn't you sell out your arena?

I know that the opening of
Shrek the Third
provides serious competition for the entertainment dollar, but come on.

It might be more understandable if you had a string of banners hanging from the rafters ... nope, that's not the reason.

It's Whiny Complaint Time!: Hey, Wendy's? You don't need to run the same ad five thousand times during a single game.

And I am no more likely to eat whatever sandwich you're pushing as a result.

Even if the Suitably Nonthreatening Male with the burger is surrounded by cute girls on either side.

Does anybody really respond to that level of advertising? Please let me know if you do. I want to know if any of my readers (or
reader
; the pending divorce has likely cut my readership in half) have seen this spot, and though,
hey, that could be me!

I could be sitting in a middle seat, which is technically the airplane's armpit, but it'll be OK because my sandwich has led me to be "sandwiched" (heh heh) by two pretty girls! (I prefer the Eternally Sunny girl in the window seat!)

Never mind that post-9/11 FAA regulations would prevent that sandwich from boarding the plane in the first place, so I would be a dork in the middle of two lovely women holding only a bag of peanuts and the latest offerings at SkyMall.

Hmmm ... "Hey, baby, I got a pen with a light in the tip!"

Won't ... work ... must ... have ... sandwich ...

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

Time for the next level. The Cavs travel to Detroit to face the Pistons in the opener of the Eastern Conference finals. You say you have a prior engagement for Monday at 8:00 PM?

You'll break it.