God how I hate mornings after losses like that one. For the second straight game, the Cavaliers fell by a count of 79-76 to the Detroit Pistons last night, and now trail the series 2-0 as the action shifts back to CTown for games on Sunday and Tuesday night. And once again, the Cavs had a chance to take care of business late, and could not. John weighs in with the good, the bad, and the summary.

THE SUMMARY:

Yesterday, I watched a TiVoed replay of Game One from Monday. You remember Game One - Cleveland played tough in the first half ... took a lead into the locker room at the intermission ... coughed away said lead in the third quarter ... made a valiant attempt to hang on ... had a chance to win the game on their last possession ... missed ... fell by a final score of 79-76 as an Anderson Varejao desperation court-length heave missed the mark as time expired ... and were left wondering where they would be had they won a very winnable game against the Pistons.

Wait a second! I don't have TiVo! That was Game Two I just watched!

In a virtual repeat of Game One, the Cavs could not pull the game out in the final seconds, and lost 79-76 (*yes, the exact same score as Game One*) to Detroit. The loss dropped Cleveland into a two-game hole in the best-of-seven series. On a positive note, Cleveland-area Paxil representatives reported a record spike in sales during the overnight hours. (That statement would actually be true if "Paxil" were spelled B-E-E-R.)

Cleveland took a double-digit lead (the first one by either team in the series) at the end of the first half; they built their 50-38 halftime advantage thanks to the scrappy play of Varejao and a steady diet of Detroit turnovers. Alas, Cavs coach Mike Brown once again apparently used the halftime break to play Whack-A-Mole instead of, say, implementing offensive adjustments. Detroit steadily chewed away the lead during the third quarter, going on an 18-5 run (which took about ten minutes, so it really wasn't a *run*; let's call it an 18-5 *power walk*) that left them with a one-point advantage (58-57) in the waning moments of the third quarter.

To Cleveland's credit - and much like Game One - they did not collapse after surrendering the lead. Instead, thanks to a couple of three-pointers by Daniel Gibson and Donyell Marshall, they regained the lead. A LeBron layup early in the fourth quarter pushed the Cleveland edge to five points, at 65-60.

Let's jump ahead to the final minute. Cleveland had a one-point lead (76-75) and the ball. LeBron drove the ball down the lane ... the defense collapsed on him ... and he kicked the ball to a wide open teammate in the right corner. Sound familiar? This time, the teammate was Sasha Pavlovic.

I would like to quibble with the official NBA site's description of the play that followed. The NBA site describes what happened next thusly:

> *Pavlovic Turnover:Traveling (1 TO)*

I would suggest an alternate phrasing:

> *Pavlovic Turnover:Massive Brain Fart (1 TO)*

That is because Pavlovic started to launch a shot, but returned to the floor with the ball still in his hands. (He tried to hot-potato it to Donyell Marshall at the last second; unfortunately, that last second occurred about one second too late.) DEE-TROIT BAS-KET-BALL!

So Detroit now had the ball with 32 seconds left and trailing by one. In slasher movie terms, that would make the Pistons the madman with the chainsaw/axe/other implement of doom, and the Cavs the ditzy blonde girl with the blazing headlights who opens the DON'T OPEN THAT DOOR YOU'RE GONNA GET KILLED YOU IDIOT! Rip Hamilton's

mask would make him the clear frontrunner for the role, but it was Rasheed Wallace who did the honors. After demonstrating the apparently proper way to get past the pesky Varejao (just push him to the floor), Wallace swished a baseline jumper to give Detroit the lead.

Cleveland now had the ball with 24 seconds left. (This is like the ditzy blonde girl trying to fight back with a spork.) LeBron drove into the lane, and heaved a shot (and Hamilton, who was hanging onto his arm) in the general vicinity of the rim. It bounced through Wallace's hands to a waiting Larry Hughes. (This is like the ditzy blonde girl poking herself in the eye while trying to fight back with a spork.) Hughes's jumper hit the front of the rim. Varejao was able to rebound the ball and try one last shot, but it too missed. Detroit rebounded the ball; children of Cavs fans everywhere learned some new phrases ("Daddy, I looked under ‘F' in the dictionary, but couldn't find that word"); and the game was over. (Not literally over, as Billups shot some free throws - two of them thanks to a foul by Marshall, and one thanks to a technical on coach Brown. But the game was figuratively, snowballs-and-Hell over.)

LeBron paced all scorers with 19 points; Pavlovic and Varejao each added 14 (Andy also collected 14 rebounds). For the Pistons, Wallace led the way with 16 points, followed closely by Jason Maxiell (*Jason Bleeping Maxiell??*
) with 15.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

THAT'S More Like Our Crazy-Haired Guy: Varejao provided a much-needed boost of energy, particularly in the first half (he almost had a double-double by halftime). He forced a couple of turnovers, grabbed several offensive rebounds, and drew an offensive foul against the opposition (although not on a charge; Detroit's Antonio McDyess threw a shoulder into him while setting a pick). He also ran the pick-and-roll play with LeBron (the same one that Detroit had such trouble defending in last year's playoffs) on multiple occasions, leading to some easy baskets.

79 Points Per Game? They're Doing Something Right: Cleveland coach Mike Brown has clearly placed a high priority on stopping Detroit guards Billups and Hamilton. In Game One, the strategy worked half of the time - while Hamilton torched the Cavs for a game-high 24 points, Billups had more turnovers (seven) than shots (six) and looked as frustrated as an erectile dysfunction-afflicted Hugh Hefner. (I know it has been a few years, but that phrase still sends shudders up my spine; thank you,
Bob Dole
.)

Last night, the strategy worked against both of Detroit's starting backcourt mates. Billups attempted only seven shots, scored 13 points, and was hassled into five turnovers. Hamilton also tallied 13 points, on a nearly Hughesian 5-of-14 from the field.

(As an added bonus, Tayshaun Prince had his second straight gonna-take-a-lot-of-booze-to-forget-it game: he missed all eight of the shots he took from the field and had but a single point.)

Detroit is a pick-your-poison team, as all five of their starters can score. They do not have a weak link. As an opponent, you have to try to stop one or two things they do well, then hope for the best. Coach Brown's defensive strategy has worked well in the first two games; it is indeed a shame that those efforts have not garnered a single victory.

It's An Outside Shot!: Unlike Game One, when they shot one for a trillion from three point range, the Cavs did some damage from beyond the arc last night. Gibson hit three bombs; Marshall sank a couple; and seldom-used Damon Jones nailed one. If Detroit can be made to respect the Cavs' outside shooting, then maybe ... *maybe* ... LeBron and the other big men will get more room to operate inside.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

It Took Only One Attempt To Get Here Tonight (Even

Though He Was 2-Of-9 On The Night): Larry Hughes, you HAVE to make that shot. Have to, have to, have to.

Can We See "Dominating LeBron", Please?: A couple of hours before the game, I received an e-mail from the always reliable Tom Oktavec, wondering which LeBron was going to show up for the game. Referring to a blog entry from last November by fellow TCF writer Erik Cassano, Oktavec wondered whether we would see Personal Rivalry LeBron, Legacy LeBron, Tired LeBron, or Scrimmage LeBron.

I think we can merge a couple of the disparaging categories into one: Walking LeBron. Walking LeBron arrived just in time for the third quarter, but he took over the game. Possession after possession, James walked the ball up the court. That approach kills the Cavs on any number of levels:

- It allows Detroit (a very good defensive team) to get set. You cannot catch a team by surprise when you're walking.
-

It encourages the four other Cavaliers to stand around and not do much aside from occasionally emit some carbon dioxide (or as I call it, the "LeBron And Four Guys Waiting For A Bus" offense).

- It encourages LeBron to dribble away most of the shot clock, then launch a long-range shot, usually while off-balance.
- From a pure results framework, the Cavs almost never score when they run their "offense" this way.

Walking LeBron was particularly unwelcome because we often saw Running LeBron in the first half. When you have seen What Could Be, a significantly lesser What Is disappoints that much more.

Petitioning To End The Game At Halftime: A consistent theme throughout the 2006-07 season has been subpar third quarters. The Cavs have often played well in the first half, retired to their locker room for a few minutes of rest, and emerged as a completely different (not in a good way) team. That's bad enough when it happens, say, in a November game against Atlanta; it's ten times worse when it happens in the Eastern

Conference Finals.

After last night, it has now happened *twice* in the Eastern Conference Finals. Mind you, Detroit did not want to win the game. "Have this game! We don't want it!," they said. "We'll even miss five shots in a row and not score a point in three minutes!" With some halftime adjustments and maybe an ounce of killer instinct, the Cavs extend an already double-digit lead, and national commentators this morning are clucking about the downfall of the mighty Pistons. Instead ... the Cavs are two games away from the end of their season.

Every Beatles Has A Ringo: Maxiell is a very good energy player. He hustles, he rebounds, he does the "little things that don't show up in the boxscore" that apparently win games (or so I've heard).

He should NOT score 15 points, with many of those coming when he was left unattended under the hoop. (Some context: in the regular season, Maxiell eclipsed

15 points exactly *three* times.) With all due respect to Mr. Maxiell, his outburst represents multiple defensive breakdowns rather than offensive ability.

"Hello, Wardrobe? Please Pull A Green Coat, A Striped Shirt, And A Vibrant Tie For Me. Thanks!": Craig Sager, you HAVE to check a mirror before leaving the dressing room. Have to, have to, have to.

***This* Is Why Game Two Was Pushed To Thursday?:** I have never understood the fascination with *American Idol*. Maybe there is some joy gained from watching the obviously untalented make fools of themselves in the early rounds. (Don't feel sorry for those folks; they can She Bang! their way to a modicum of fame.) The best performers definitely have talent, but the entire show is carefully packaged and has had any hints of originality sliced out long before. The show's producers insist on extending that pre-packaged swill to other media as well. (A few years back, they presented the execrable *From Justin to Kelly*

as a "romantic love story"; I hear that title and still think "biography of a transsexual.")

PREDICTION: Justin Guarini will show up on a nationally televised reality show within three years. (The early line has him appearing on *Dancing With The Stars*, although I am hoping that he starts moving his fork and doesn't stop until he waddles his way onto *Celebrity Fit Club*
.)

COMPLETELY NEUTRAL OBSERVATION ABOUT THE GAME:

Separated At Birth (Upper Lip Edition):
Cavaliers' owner
Dan Gilbert
and Pistons' coach
Flip Saunders
.

COMPLETELY NEUTRAL OBSERVATION THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE GAME, EXCEPT THAT THIS NEWS STORY IS RUNNING AS I WRITE THIS COLUMN:

Keep In Mind That It Was Built By The Lowest Bidder: Cedar Point is about to unveil its new roller coaster " Maverick "; the ride was scheduled to open with the rest of the park a few weeks ago, but was delayed as ride engineers changed the track configuration because of safety concerns. Um, why don't YOU go on it first? (And I say that as a coaster enthusiast who once waited in line for three hours on opening day for Millennium Force .)

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The series shifts to Cleveland for the third and fourth games of the series. Game Three will start at 8:30 Sunday night; Game Four, 8:00 PM Tuesday night. I may just cut to the chase and write a couple of articles describing 79-76 finishes ahead of time.