It's hard to put what we witnessed last night into words, but if anyone can do it ... it's our guy John Hnat. John has been a huge piece to the growth of this website with his incredible work on the Cavaliers beat for us all season, and he knocks another one out of the park for us this morning describing last night's festivities. The fun is far from over Cavs fans. Saturday is going to be a zoo downtown! If you have a spare second, email John and help thank him for all he's done for us this season.

THE SUMMARY:

I have two images in my mind this morning.

One image dates to June of 2003, when the Cavaliers made LeBron James the first pick in the NBA draft. As LeBron strode to the podium in his crisp white suit to shake NBA Commissioner David Stern's hand, Cavs fans everywhere (what few there were, after years of Tragic Langdons and DeSagana Diops and Darius Mileses and Milt Palacios had eroded the fan base to me, Joe Tait, and maybe a hundred or so other people) had a new hope. We had visions of LeBron somehow - *s*

omehow
- leading our beleaguered Cavs to an NBA title or six, and becoming one of the all-time greats along the way. In a "
Phase Three is Profit
"-worthy line of thinking, we did not now exactly
how
we were going to get from drafting LeBron to an NBA title; we just knew that it
had
to happen.

The other image comes from the movie version of Sebastian Junger's
The Perfect Storm
. (I'm assuming you saw the movie or at least know the basic story: fishing boat takes on massive hurricane; the hurricane wins, which you knew in advance because the movie is called
The Perfect Storm
and not
The Perfect Fishing Boat.
) Early in that movie, a meteorologist is studying the Atlantic weather pattern ... hey, there's a hurricane over Bermuda ... and then this low pressure system over Sable Island ... and a cold front sweeping down from Canada ... hmmm, what if they all collide? A half-hour or so later in movie time, we return to a scene with this weatherman. He sees the storms colliding, forming the massive, once-in-a-lifetime event that he had imagined. And he says:

> *Oh my God. It's happening.*

That is exactly how we should all feel this morning. Oh my God ...

LeBron is becoming one of the all-time greats, right before our very eyes. It's happening. He has placed the entire team on his massive shoulders and is carrying them to the Promised Land. And last night, he had a game that will be referenced for years, one of those efforts that goes to the top of his canon.

Scoring the last 25 Cavalier points (and 29 of their last 30) en route to 49 points overall, LeBron willed the Cavs to a 109-107 double-overtime victory at Detroit. The win gave the Cavs a 3-2 edge in the best-of-seven series against the Pistons, and puts Cleveland just one game away from its first ever appearance in the NBA Finals.

The game pretty much followed the same script (time for a gratuitous link !) as the first four games in the series, except that Detroit took a small lead in the first half (they led by as many as eight points and held a slim 52-51 margin at the half), and the Cavs did not fold after the break (for the first time in the series, they won the third quarter. With one quarter (and, as it turned out, two overtimes) remaining, the score was tied at 70 apiece.

LeBron already had 19 points through three quarters, a good-but-not-spectacular game by his standards. At the outset of the fourth quarter, the Cavs held serve (even taking a one-point lead) while James rested. The Cavs hit a bit of a dry spell later in the quarter, and found themselves trailing 88-81 with 3:15 remaining in regulation after a pair of Rip Hamilton free throws.

That's when LeBron went to work.

He knifed through the lane for a layup and a foul. Although he missed the consequent free throw, Sasha Pavlovic collared the rebound, and Drew Gooden was fouled on the extra possession. (Gooden split a pair of free throws; his point would be the last one scored by a Cavalier other than James.) Thirty seconds later, LeBron swished a three-pointer to cut the lead to one. The Palace of Auburn Hills crowd, sure of a DEE-TROIT VIC-TOR-EE just a minute prior, shuddered with fear. That fear became reality with 31 seconds left in the quarter, as James drove the right side of the lane and threw down a powerful dunk to give the Cavs the 90-89 lead.

However, the Pistons have some prime-time players of their own. After all, Chauncey Billups has the nickname "Mr. Big Shot" for a reason, right? Just as quickly as James had given the Cavs the lead, Billups took it right back, draining a three-pointer to put Detroit up 92-90. After a time out, LeBron went to work again, with *another* drive and dunk to tie the game. The drive left Detroit with enough time for one more shot; Billups' three point attempt missed as the buzzer sounded.

LeBron continued to sparkle in the first overtime, with another dunk, a few free throws, and an "are you kidding me?" off-balanced jumper with 33 seconds left to give Cleveland a 100-96 lead. Alas, Cleveland could not hold the lead, as both Rasheed Wallace and Billups earned trips to the line (and cashed out their free throws) on Detroit's last two possessions of the quarter.

With the score tied at 100 apiece at the end of the first overtime, it was time for five more minutes for LeBron to build his legend. He hit a pair of jumpers to keep pace with the Pistons. Then, with a minute and a half remaining, disaster struck: Detroit's Chris Webber made a shot with Zydrunas Ilgauskas leaning on him, and got the foul as well. His free throw gave Detroit a 107-104 lead.

Fourteen seconds later, James erased that lead with one flick of the wrist from beyond the arc. The teams traded non-scoring possessions, leaving Detroit with the ball and 30 seconds to go. Wallace attempted a turnaround jumper with 13 seconds left, but Anderson Varejao blocked the shot, and Donyell Marshall gathered the rebound.

Everybody in the building knew that LeBron was going to attempt the last shot. Everybody but the Pistons, that is.; they played shockingly little defense as LeBron drove to the hoop and laid the ball in for a 109-107 advantage. Two seconds remained on the clock. The ball was inbounded to Billups ... he attempted a shot to tie the game ... Varejao appeared to get the tiniest bit of fingertip on the ball, perhaps affecting its arc ... and the ball bounced off the rim.

Game over.

Cavs win.

Wow.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

The Free Spot On The Bingo Card: LeBron. What a game. I have already said enough about him, but I wanted to mention it in the "What I Liked" section, just for the record.

Can You Stand One More Compliment?: Late in the first quarter, Detroit's Antonio McDyess grabbed Varejao around the neck as Andy drove to the hoop, throwing the hirsute Brazilian to the floor. It was clearly a flagrant foul, but LeBron may have bumped it from a Flagrant One (one shot) to a Flagrant Two (two shots, opposing player ejected and possibly suspended for a future game) with his reaction. He sprinted toward McDyess in a Let's Throw Down sort of way, knowing full well that all other players and the refs would step in long before he got within arm's reach. LeBron's reaction pretty much screamed "that was a cheap foul," and gave the refs something to think about. (Not to mention that we are now seeing the Cavs stand by each other. Contrast LeBron's reaction with the Cavs' collective yawn last season after Rasheed Wallace cracked open Z's dome with an elbow.)

Larry, Save The Tape: Early in the first quarter, Larry Hughes buried a pair of three-pointers from the left wing. Why did the shots go in? *Because he released the ball at the top of his jump, instead of releasing it on the way*

down . (Particularly on the second attempt, he had to release the ball quickly, as a Detroit defender contested the shot.)

19-18: That was the Cavs' advantage in the third quarter. It may have been only one point, but compared to the earlier games in the series, it was a landslide performance for the Wine 'n Gold (Except When They're Wearing The Alternate Navy).

The quarter started with the same Look Out, Here Come The Pistons! Script: Billups drilled a three-pointer almost before his warmups hit the floor, and a pair of Tayshaun Prince baskets (including a three-pointer of his own) meant that the Cavs were almost immediately down by eight. But the Cavs answered, and after a Sasha Pavlovic three-pointer, a James bank shot, and a Varejao layup (off a terrific LeBron pass), the game was knotted at 65.

Detroit had one more mini-surge, scoring the next five points to take a 70-65 lead. Thanks to another LeBron jumper and a Gibson three-ball with a second to go, the Cavs erased that lead too.

Law Of The Jungle: The NBA has its own system of justice, one that often eludes fans. When two players go after a loose ball, and one kinda-sorta fouls the other as the ball goes out of bounds, the referees will typically not call the foul, but award the ball to the other team. So if Varejao bumps Wallace while they scramble for a loose ball, Andy will not get whistled for the foul, but Detroit will get the ball - even if the ball actually touched Wallace last. It's a split-the-baby sort of decision, and it happens all the time.

In that same vein, referees are human. They know when they have made a questionable or bad call; and when they do, they will compensate the hosed team with a favorable call as soon as they can. And that is why in the second quarter, after Hughes was whistled for dribbling the ball out of bounds while he was actually trying to call a time out, Detroit's Hamilton was whistled for a questionable traveling violation. I'm not sure that Rip had actually lifted his foot before he was whistled for the violation. I sure do love this game.

Saving It For The Right Time: As I wrote last time, my viewing of Game Four was punctuated by a phone call/argument with my soon-to-be-ex wife (
why do I feel like
Hiko
all of a sudden?
) that lasted most of the second quarter. During that argument,

the Cavs built a double-digit lead; said lead evaporated after I hung up the phone. That connection was not lost on me (or on those of you who e-mailed "call your ex during Game Five"). I am happy to say that I did
not
call her during the game, which means that none of the Ex-Wife Karma was used to get the Cavs their win. (I am planning to call from The Q tomorrow night if necessary. Hey, maybe we should have the first webcast in TheClevelandFan.com history!)

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

Y'Know, You Didn't Really *Need* Two Overtimes:
Frequent readers of this column know that missing free throws makes me pull my hair out, right from the roots. So you can imagine the Goodenesque dome I am sporting today thanks to these facts:

- In the fourth quarter, Detroit made all eight of their free throw attempts.
- In the same quarter, Cleveland was *2 of 9* from the line. That performance included three bricked free throws by LeBron (about the only black mark on his

report card last night) and a lovely one-of-three effort from Larry Hughes after he was fouled while shooting a three-pointer.

I know: without that wall of bricks, then the game doesn't go into two overtimes, and LeBron doesn't have a game for the ages, yadda yadda yadda.

One Good Game Per Month, One Smart Play Per Month: The Drew Gooden That Time Of The Month theory holds that Drew has one good game per month (which he had in Game Four; we're still not sure if the theory works per calendar month or on a rolling basis, so he may yet have a June effort in him). The theory seems to apply to individual plays as well - once Gooden makes a very smart play, he will not have another for weeks. (He used that one in Game Four as well, with his steal of a Billups pass with just over a minute remaining.)

So it is that with the Cavs staked to an early 10-7 lead (thanks to that pair of Hughes three-pointers), we saw Detroit's Billups drive past Hughes. No sin on Larry

there; he does have a bad wheel, and Chauncey can blow by even the healthiest of defenders. Fortunately for the Cavs, Drew Gooden was between Billups and the hoop. Not as fortunately, *he was turned in the opposite direction, with his back to Billups*
. Chauncey practically ran up Gooden's back and laid the ball in. Even using the very low bar I set for Gooden's help defense (ants have to limbo to get below it), Drew still could not clear it.

Not Like They Changed It This Season: I do not know if the barbs for this one should be aimed at the Pistons, the Cavs, TNT, or somebody else, but ...

Just before halftime, TNT's Craig Sager (again wearing an outfit that used a majority of the 96-crayon box of Crayolas) did a spot from outside the Cavs' locker room, describing the team's strategy for the halftime break. The Cavs logo on the locker room door was the old, mid-90s-vintage logo. The new Cavs logo has been in place for four seasons. Way to stay with the times, guys!

Having A Bad Feeling About This: In the 2005-06 playoffs, the Cavs played Detroit in the playoffs. Detroit had home court advantage in the best-of-seven series. Detroit won the first two games at home; the Cavs rallied to win the next three, including an epic Game Five win at The Palace of The Farthest Suburb Away From Detroit. The Cavs then lost an oh-so-close Game Six at home, and ran out of gas in the series finale.

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I would like to appeal to the God of Cleveland Sports: please let the similarities end there. (And no, I don't mean in the sense of "OK, it'll be two Detroit blowouts in the final two games!")

IDLE JINGOISTIC THOUGHT:

From The Same People Who Brought You "Freedom Fries": Ten bucks says that some local figure, leasing a couple of those promised fifteen minutes of fame, will propose renaming Detroit Avenue (a relatively major road on Cleveland's west side) to Cleveland Avenue, at least for a day or two.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The most important game in the history of the Cleveland Cavaliers (apologies to those who remember the Miracle of Richfield days) will take place at Quicken Loans Arena tomorrow evening. And regardless of the game's outcome, it will not be the most important game

in team history for long, as either the Cavs will advance to the NBA Finals, or they will play a winner-takes-all finale at Detroit next Monday.