Ouch. The Cavs caught their second straight bare bottom spanking in San Antonio last night, falling behind the Spurs two games to zero in the NBA Finals. Don't let the 103-92 final fool you, this was a beating. The Spurs led by 11 points after one quarter (28-17), 25 at the half (58-33), and 27 after three quarters (89-62), before allowing us to maintain some shred of dignity with a fourth quarter flurry that ultimately fell short. And the Sopranos finale stunk. I hate Mondays.

THE SUMMARY:

There will be no summary this morning, other than to say that San Antonio prevailed over the Cavs, 103-92, last night at the AT&T Center. The Spurs led by 11 points after one quarter (28-17), 25 at the half (58-33), and 27 after three quarters (89-62), before allowing Cleveland to maintain some shred of dignity with a fourth quarter flurry that ultimately fell short. The victory gave San Antonio a 2-0 lead in the best-of-seven Finals.

Despite sitting most of the first quarter after being whistled for two quick fouls, LeBron James stuffed the stat sheet in a reasonably Bronesque fashion, scoring 25 points, pulling down seven rebounds, and dishing out six assists. Daniel Gibson, continuing to see increased minutes,

added 15 points, and Drew Gooden had 13. Once again the Spurs' triumverate of Tony Parker (30 points), Manu Ginobili (25 points), and Tim Duncan (who approached a triple-double himself with 23 points, nine rebounds, and eight assists) led the way for the Western Conference champs.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

A Fast Start: On the first possession of the game, San Antonio's Michael Finley threw the ball out of bounds as a result of some tough defense. On the resultant possession, James drilled a jumper to give Cleveland a 2-0 lead.

I am indeed struggling to find any way in which the glass is half full.

A Fast Quarter: The Cavs deserve some praise for not completely folding their tents despite being down by 27 points entering the fourth quarter. Thanks to a Gibson jumper and a pair of Damon Jones three pointers, the lead was within 20 with more than ten minutes remaining. A few minutes later, Donyell Marshall drilled a three pointer to cut the lead to sixteen ... then Gibson nailed a jumper to cut the lead to fourteen ... then Anderson Varejao made a jumper ... then Gibson stole the ball

from Parker, drove to the other end, and had his missed layup attempt put in by LeBron, who was fouled on the play, and who made the free throw. With five and a half minutes remaining, the long-dormant Cavs were now down by only nine points. Another three-point play by LeBron would cut the lead to eight; alas, the Cavs would get no closer.

The Cavs proved in that fourth quarter that if they turn up the defense and limit silly mistakes, they can play with the Spurs. If nothing else (and it indeed may be *nothing else*), they have something to build on as the series shifts back to Cleveland.

We'll Be More Willing To Witness That: After his disappointing Game One, LeBron looked more like his usual self last night. He was visibly more aggressive, driving the ball to the hole more frequently and more assertively than in Game One.

My personal favorite play was his layup that cut the lead to eight points with just under five minutes remaining in the game. Covered by Ginobili, LeBron smacked the talented Argentinian in the mouth (not completely intentionally, but not exactly *inadv ertently*
either). If San Antonio is going to play a physical, hands-on defense, then a physical, hands-on offense is definitely justified.

The Boobie Report: Gibson played for just under 32 minutes last night, and once again he was the most productive Cavalier not named "LeBron." He is the team's most consistent outside scoring threat, and opposing defenses have to respect his presence at the three-point line in a way that they do not respect other Cavaliers.

The Wild Thing Shows Up: Varejao was perhaps the only reason the Cavs did not get blown out on the boards, as he gathered 10 rebounds and at least as many shots to the head or chest. With the other Cavs' big men relegated to non-factor status (Gooden had six rebounds; Zydrunas Ilgauskas, only four), Varejao provided some much-needed energy.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

There was a lot not to like about the game: the Cavs' poor outside shooting, their defensive breakdowns, their turnovers, their lack of hustle in what should have been the most important game of their careers. Writing this a few hours after the game, I have repressed most of those memories; here are the few that remain:

If That's *The Book*, Maybe It's Time To Remove A Few Pages: Sports media often reference *The Book*, an imaginary collection of wisdom that determines what should be done in various game situations. One of the chapters of the basketball edition of *The Book* says that you should remove a player from the game if it is the first quarter and he has already accumulated two fouls. The thinking seems to be that if you leave this player in the game, he will continue to be a foul machine, and will use up his limit long before the game is over.

Coach Mike Brown put his dog-eared copy of *The Book* to full use last night. With 9:05 remaining in the first quarter, LeBron was tagged with his second foul. Going by *The Book*, Coach Brown removed LeBron from the game, and sat him for the balance of the first quarter.

One tiny little problem: while LeBron was chewing his nails on the bench, the Spurs increased their lead from three points to 11.

The desire to protect LeBron from further foul trouble is understandable. That being said, this is *LeBron Sporking James*. They probably would not admit it unless you shot sodium pentothal down their throats with a garden hose, but the referees are well aware of James's star status, and they would not have whistled him for additional fouls unless they had no other choice (say, if Bron tackled Parker into the $2,000 courtside seats). Taking the best player off the court for nine minutes, and hoping that Gibson and Eric Snow and some bailing wire can hold the team together for that time, is a decision borne of desperation. When that desperation is rooted in some set of imaginary *rules*, then the decision becomes hard to comprehend.

When Did *These* Guys Return?: Free throws were an Achilles Heel for the Cavs throughout the regular season: they were near the bottom of the league in free throw percentage. During the playoffs, they have shot a significantly better percentage from the line.

That has changed in the Finals. It's impossible to tell if it is because of nerves, or the Texas air, or the distracting

presence of Eva Longoria at courtside, or a simple case of water seeking its own level. Whatever that reason, Cleveland has returned to the spotty free throw shooting that has been a hallmark of the 2006-07 season. Consider this series of events in the second quarter:

- Varejao splits a pair of free throws;
- Snow splits a pair of free throws;
- James splits a pair of free throws;
- James makes a pair of free throws;
- Varejao misses a pair of free throws;
- James splits a pair of free throws.

During that stretch of the second quarter, the Cavs went from a 15 point deficit to trailing by 18. Granted, we are still talking about a depressing situation, but leaving points on the table is never going to help.

WANTED: For Killing Momentum: In my mind, the worst plays are the "momentum killers" -- the ones that happen right when the team is gathering steam. It's one thing to dribble the ball out of bounds when you are already down by 20; it is quite another matter to dribble the ball out of bounds when you have cut that lead to single digits and have the other team on the ropes.

With that in mind, here is a sampling of plays that caused one or two of my blood vessels to burst:

- With a little under eight minutes to go, the Cavs had already cut San Antonio's 27-point lead to 17. They played good defense, forcing the Spurs' Bruce Bowen to take a jumper with the shot clock winding down. He missed it ... but Duncan grabbed the rebound. Duncan missed a return shot ... but Bowen rebounded THAT miss. The ball found its way to Brent Barry, who lined up a three-pointer. He missed ... but Francisco Elson rebounded THAT miss, and laid the ball in the hoop. Because we do not have "The Diff" available just now, let me help you with the math: THREE offensive rebounds and FOUR San Antonio shots on that one possession alone.
- With four and a half minutes to go, and Cleveland trailing by only ten (and having scored 15 of the game's previous 19 points), they had an inexplicable possession that ended with Jones launching a desperation three-pointer (in case you could not sense the tone, he missed it).
- With two minutes remaining, Gibson drilled a three-pointer to keep Cleveland within nine points (101-92). Bowen missed a three-pointer on San Antonio's next time down the court ... but Duncan grabbed the offensive rebound and laid the ball back in.

Not that the Cavs' chances were terribly good prior to that play, but that sequence effectively ended the game.

It Should Be The End Of His Season: Larry Hughes scored no points in what appeared to be 20 painful minutes. The plantar fascia injury to his left foot seems to be robbing him of his quickness, his ability to slash to the basket, and his jump sh ... well,
some
things he had lost previously. At this point, it is painful to watch Hughes try to compete, because his body is betraying him. It is noble that he wants to play through his reputation as an injury-prone player; but when that injury has him playing at maybe half of his normal effectiveness (and that is probably being generous), it's time to sit. (More to the point, it's time for the Cavs' coaching staff to
make
him sit, as no self-respecting player is ever going to willingly beg out of a game. Don't blame Larry. Blame the man who tells Larry what to do.)

Speaking Of Players With A History Of Foot

Problems: Zydrunas Ilgauskas: any time you want to show up in this series, please feel welcome. Nine points and four rebounds is far below what you are capable of doing, big guy.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

A couple of weeks ago, the Cavs lost their first two games on the road to Detroit, then returned home to win the next two, eventually winning the series. Can history repeat itself? If it can, it will start tomorrow evening at Quicken Loans Arena. That game will be followed by home games on Thursday and (if necessary) Sunday nights.