Well, so much for having all their players back. Fielding a complete lineup for the first time all season, the Cavs got their butts handed to them last night out in New Jersey, falling to the Nets by a 105-97 count. The old Larry Hughes was back (bricking 11 of 15 shots), Andy Varejao played to a -23 plus/minus, and Boobie Gibson attempted just four shots. John Hnat comments on all these items and more in this morning's recap of last night's Cavs loss.

THE SUMMARY:

So much for having all of their players back.

Fielding a complete lineup (well, reserves Donyell Marshall and Cedric Simmons were still injured, but we're not talking about Parish and McHale here) for the first time this season, the Cavs were trounced by the Nets, 105-97, at New Jersey's Izod Arena. (*I must have missed the switch from Continental Airlines Arena*
.)

The game started well enough. The Cavs scored the first five points and 18 of the first 24, taking a double-digit lead while many fans were still finding their seats. New Jersey made only one of their first 11 shots. Let's pause here for a moment, and pretend that the game ended there. Maybe the Nets forfeited - simply walking off the court in the face of the Cavs' clear awesome-ocity. The Cavs would be on a two-game winning streak (*is two games really a "streak"? Who cares when you have lost six of your last seven games*) and would be within a game of getting back to the .500 mark.

Alas, the Nets would make 38 of their next 69 (a 55% clip). Cleveland would make ... less than that. And that's why we're talking about a Cavs loss this morning.

LeBron James approached a triple-double with his 29 points, eight assists, and six rebounds. (A skeptic could note that he approached a *quadruple* -double, as he also had six turnovers.) Zydrunas Ilgauskas, who should give James a commission for all of the offense that LeBron opens for him, had 21 points and 12 rebounds. New Jersey's Big Three of Vince Carter (32 points), Richard Jefferson (24 points), and Jason Kidd (eight points, 11 assists, eight rebounds) powered the Nets to their victory.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

When The Play Of The Game Comes Two Minutes After The Opening Tip-Off, You May Be In Trouble: Ilgauskas actually approached a triple-double as well, as he had six assists (a new season high, and one away from his career best). The most

memorable helper came early in the game, as he threw a nice alley-oop to Drew Gooden for an early 5-0 lead.

He Does More Than Just Walk The Sidelines: Give Coach Mike Brown credit for bringing Ira Newble into the game with 2:53 remaining and the Cavs trailing by a deuce. No, credit is not normally what a coach should get for bringing Ira Newble into a game, particularly the waning minutes of a close contest.

I want to present the immediacy of my reaction, but I am also aware that this is a family web site (it has a wife and two little web sites at home). As a compromise, I will replace a certain word with the word *puppy* in describing how I felt about Newble entering the game:

What the puppy is that puppying Mike Brown doing? He's puppying bringing Ira Mother-Puppying Newble into the game? How puppying stupid is that?

Well, there's a reason why Mike Brown is coach of a professional basketball team and I am not. He brought Newble in specifically to foul New Jersey's Josh Boone, who had missed all but one of his four free throws earlier in the game

(bringing his average for the season to something like 22%). Shaq, Ben Wallace, Josh Boone ... yeah, that progression is clear. Anyway, Newble fouled Boone and was immediately lifted. Boone split the pair of resultant free throws, keeping it a one-possession game. (Moments later ,when the Nets got the ball, the Cavs fouled Boone again. New Jersey head coach Lawrence Frank removed Boone the next chance he received.)

No Snappy Title Here, As I Need To Submit This Column And Have Used Up My Creativity For One Night: Usually, when I mention the Cavs' free-throw shooting, it is on the bad side of the ledger. Not last night. Cleveland made 14 of their 16 free throws. Huzzah!

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

Bad LeBron: For the first time I can recall this season, we saw Bad LeBron last night. No, that doesn't mean "bad" as in "sucky"; it means "bad" as in "what were you thinking?" When the Cavs fell behind in the fourth quarter, James often reverted to his one-on-five mentality, taking wild shot after wild shot. Yes, he got a couple of them to fall, but that result does not make the decision any wiser: usually, an off-balance 20 footer should be a desperation measure, not the shot you take

with 15 seconds remaining on the clock.

The worst of these came with 1:41 remaining, just after the Nets had stretched their lead to six on a Jefferson basket. LeBron dribbled ... and dribbled ... and dribbled ... and then took one of his leaning-to-the-left three pointers. He missed badly, and while the game was not really "over" as a result, it did not make the Cavs' job any easier.

LeBron doesn't find his way to this side of the column often (with good reason - hell, the guy scores 29 points and I am not satisfied?). He is just that much better of a player when he involves the rest of his team, instead of trying to go it alone. (*Game Five of last year's Eastern Conference Championship series excepted.*
)

To Fans With Seats Below The Cavs' Basket: Sit At Your Own Risk: The Larry Hughes we all know and ... tolerate ... was back in force last night. The final tally of the carnage: 4-of-15 shooting from the floor, 1-of-4 from

three-point range, no free throws, and one monu-effing-mentally stupid turnover with 1:35 remaining, killing whatever small chance the Cavs had of pulling this one out. After displaying a consistent shot against Indiana last Tuesday, Shotgun Larry returned last night. Shots off the front of the rim? Shots off the side of the rim? Shots that missed the iron completely and barely drew backboard? Larry had ‘em all, big time.

Then again, it's all about statistics and how you interpret them. In his last two games, Hughes is averaging 22.5 points! (*Sorry, Larry, I am not available to be your agent.*)

Incidentally, the Cavs' crack announcing team of Fred McLeod and Austin Carr did not *once* mention Hughes' newfound upper body strength. The previous two games, since Hughes returned from his knee injury, those announcers floridly described Hughes's more defined musculature. It's not often that you see professional sports announcers approach the line between "description" and "gay porn," but McLeod and A.C. were just a bit too effusive in their praise. (Note that this column's official stance is Not That There's Anything Wrong With That. Hell, I am watching a

Project Runway
rerun as I type these words. I may as well put on some Kenny G and sip a wine cooler.)

Not to digress - what am I saying, digression is kind of the point of this column - but am I the only one mildly troubled by the descriptions of prospective draftees during NFL Draft season? Every spring, the thoughts of a disturbing number of men (yes, there may be a few female draft fans out there, but let's call a spade a spade) turn to young collegians with "thick trunks" and "big bubbles" and "wide bases" and ... you get the idea. I'm not a mental health professional, but I know unhealthy when I see it.

Maybe He Should Have Just Walked The Sidelines:
Now that the Cavs have most of their players back, including all of their guards, I did not think we would have to worry about Eric Snow and Damon Jones occupying the court at the same time. Surely, the playing time would be chewed by Hughes, Daniel Gibson, the Brown brigade, and Sasha Pavlovic, no? No. Coach Brown put both of them out there early in the second quarter. The Nets rattled off five points, ending that experiment

tout de suite
. (Snow and Jones returned again in the fourth quarter, although that was because Gibson was momentarily removed thanks to a Jason Kidd shoulder to his already-swollen jaw.) Why, with so many other *strapping young men with sinewy muscles and ...* whoops, thought it was draft season for a moment. Let's try this again. Why, with so many other guards on the roster, most of them with varying degrees of Not Sucking in their game, were Snow and Jones out there at the same time?

Maybe He Should Have Called A Few Plays Too:
Here is the number that jumps off the stat page the most for me:

Daniel Gibson attempted four shots last night.

Let that sink in for a second. Gibson is the team's best shooter. He played a little over 32 minutes last night. He took *four* shots (all from three-point range; he made three of them).

Is it just me, or does "getting your team's best shooter the ball more than four times a game" rank pretty high on the list of coaching priorities? For the love of God, run him off a screen or two. Run a play designed with him in mind (and one other than "if you're 25 feet away and open, shoot it").

As Long As We're In The Neighborhood: The Cavs' defense, which had already taken several steps backwards since the end of last season, may have backed into Coach Brown Bursts A Blood Vessel territory. Time after time, they doubled the ball handler ... and time after time, they left a New Jersey player wide open under the basket. Josh Boone came into the game scoring 2.5 points per game; he had 15, a season high. Most of those points came on dunks when no Cavalier bothered to pick him up. (Granted, with the way Boone shoots - he missed multiple
dunks
last night - that strategy makes some sense. But even the most shooting-disabled 6-foot-11 guy will eventually figure how to drop the ball through the hoop.)

Department Of Just Sayin': Anderson Varejao, lauded

as a difference-maker by those who worship at the altar of the plus-minus statistic, posted a plus-minus of *negative 23*
last night. (And continuing our ongoing theme that the Cavs' bench has been Not So Good, every non-starter had a negative plus-minus, while four of the five starters actually had positive numbers.)

NOT THAT YOU ASKED, BUT...

The Disturbing Trend Continues: Because of other pressing commitments (a nice way of saying "I have a life and can't write for you people 82 times plus the playoffs"), I have scaled back this column to approximately half of the games this season. I do not know if it is happenstance, but I would like to point out the following statistic: with last night's loss, the Cavs are now 3-8 this season in games that I cover.

That record has not gone unnoticed by the eagle-eyed Number One Fan, Tom Oktavec, who

sent this message shortly after the final buzzer:

Can you please cover some Celtics and Pistons games?

Be happy to, Tom. I should have the time on my hands. As of right now, I am quitting this column! (Just kidding. But it becomes less and less of a joke the longer the trend continues.)

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

Could anything be more fun than trekking downtown through the flying snow to watch the Cavs take on the Philadelphia 76ers at The Q? If your answer to that question is "no," then today's your freaking lucky day, as the 76ers roll (skid?) into town tonight. Maybe if we are lucky, Sixers point

guard Andre Miller won't be allowed to leave town.