It was a heartbreaker last night at The Q, as the Cavs fell 110-108 to the Phoenix Suns on a bucket by Shawn Marion with three seconds left. It was Marion's only field goal of the night. The Cavs held a big lead for most of the first three quarters of this one, and the way it went down late caused LeBron James to go nuts on a garbage can in the tunnel afterwards, the tape of which led Sportscenter this morning. Sam tells us about the loss.

The Cavaliers needed a game like this, maybe even a loss like this.

The final verdict was visiting Phoenix 110, Cavs 108 on Friday, when Suns forward Shawn Marion hit a runner in the key with 1.1 seconds left. The shot erased the Cavs' 18-point first half lead and ended their winning streak at five.

But all of that is beside the point.

What really matters is the Cavs learned they are still worthy. They are still worthy to be considered contenders in the Eastern Conference, and even the league overall. Despite injuries and early doubts (and a few bad losses), they are showing some real grit -- even in defeat.

Remember, we're talking about the Suns here. They run, they gun, they have lots of fun. They spread the offense and shoot 3-pointers, daring you to make them score inside. And when you do, they usually oblige.

The Suns have also been among the league's top three or four teams (sometimes better) in each of the past five seasons, and are 31-13 this year.

Nor does it hurt that their point guard is Steve Nash, who's won two league MVP awards and has justified serious consideration for a third.

Nash scoots around the floor like a soccer player in high tops -- and young players should note how he never looks down while dribbling. He understands that the ball is round and the floor is flat, that it will bounce straight back up when you push it to the floor. Mostly, he uses his eyes to focus on where teammates are spotting up for shots, hitting them with pinpoint passes the very moment they get open.

As Cavs forward LeBron James marveled, "That offense doesn't work without Steve Nash at point guard."

And that offense just happened to feature 17 made 3-pointers on Friday, a record for a Cavs' opponent.

Bottom line: These guys ain't too shabby.

That is why the Cavs can take something positive from the game, and tell themselves they still have a real shot of making something special out of this season.

No, you never want to lose. But if you do, there are worse ways to go down than this.

Yes, it was frustrating -- just ask James, who kicked over a garbage can on his way into the locker room after the game. And yes, it was one the Cavs let get away after sprinting to a 69-point first half.

Still, the home team displayed heart and determination, two things that are becoming more and more evident as the season goes on.

"We made a few mistakes that we could have cleaned up, but we played hard," said James, who scored 36 points one day after being named an All-Star Game starter. "I can't fault anybody on our team for how hard we played tonight."

For the Cavs, losses like this teach them a little more about the importance of executing at the end of close games, how to focus on defense and work for a good shot on offense. It sounds simple, but the difference between winning and losing always comes down to the game's basics.

As James mentioned, it was a tough loss, but one worth being a part of.

"We gave ourselves an opportunity to win," he said. "They just made one more play at the end."

HEADING WEST

The Cavs are off to the West Coast for a three-game swing, which opens Sunday in Los Angeles against Kobe Bryant and the Lakers. The game will be televised nationally on ABC (3:30 p.m. EST).

James has repeatedly called Bryant the league's best player, and didn't change his tune after Friday's game.

"Scoring-wise, he's the best player in my mind," James said. "If you look at their team, they don't have as much talent as some of the others (in the Western Conference). Yet they are right there and he is the reason for that."

Entering Friday's games, James led the league in scoring at 29.5 points per game, while Bryant was second at 27.4.

NOTES

Starting shooting guard Sasha Pavlovic sprained his left foot in Wednesday's win over Washington, and is expected to miss 6-8 weeks. Ira Newble started in his place Friday night. ... During the last six games, center Zydrunas Ilgauskas is averaging 15.3 points, 8.0 rebounds and shooting .611 percent from the field. There's an off chance he will be named as an East reserve for the All-Star Game. ... Larry Hughes added 25 points for the Cavs, his second-highest scoring output of the year.

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