With wins at Dallas and at San Antonio already in the books, the Cavaliers had an opportunity for a franchise first in Houston on Thursday night - a road sweep of the Texas trio of the Mavericks, Spurs, and Rockets. The milestone will have to wait. With three members of the rotation out of action- including its top two power forwards- the Cavaliers were muscled by the red-hot Rockets, 92-77. And Jesse tells us about it.

With wins at Dallas and at San Antonio already in the books, the Cavaliers had an opportunity for a franchise first in Houston on Thursday night - a road sweep of the Texas trio of the Mavericks, Spurs, and Rockets. The milestone will have to wait. With three members of the rotation out of action- including its top two power forwards- the Cavaliers were muscled by the red-hot Rockets, 92-77.

Game Recap by Quarter

First Quarter

It wasn't quite the 71 combined-point extravaganza of the Boston game, but both Cleveland and Houston took it up and down the floor with

alacrity in a fast-paced first quarter. The Cavaliers, as is their habit, fell in love with the jump shot, and it wasn't going down- the Wine & Gold shot just 40% from the field (8-for-20) and, without Andy or Drew Gooden to pick off the caroms, were out-rebounded 14-8 by the Rockets, who were led by the frontcourt of Yao (eight points, three rebounds) and Luis Scola (six points, three assists). Late in the quarter, LeBron began to take it to the hole with authority, but was unable to finish, missing three consecutive foul shots. Still, LBJ paced Cleveland's scorers with eight, as the Cavaliers finished the period down by four, 23-19.

Second Quarter

LeBron left the game at the 10:38 mark of the second period, with the Cavaliers trailing 25-21. When he returned to the floor four minutes later, the score was 30-27 in favor of Houston- a rare plus number without the King. Doing all of the scoring in LBJ's brief absence was Damon Jones, who swished a pair of three-pointers. Houston stretched its lead to seven before the Cavaliers ended the half on a 12-6 run- a spurt spiced by the rarity of a couple of bottomed-out Larry Hughes jumpers- and went to the locker room trailing by one, 40-39.

Cleveland's disadvantage up front was glaringly evident in the first-half numbers. Houston out-rebounded the Cavaliers 28-20 in the first two periods, including eight offensive boards to Cleveland's one. The Rockets also distributed well, racking up 13 assists, while the jump-shooting Cavaliers had just seven. Houston led despite shooting just 35.6% and getting nothing out of Tracy MacGrady, who was weakened by a bout with the flu.

Third Quarter

Houston had shot a miserable 1-for-11 from three-point range in the first half, but opened up the third quarter with back-to-back treys by Rafer Alston and Shane Battier, part of a 13-5 run that made it 53-44 Rockets at the 9:25 mark. T-Mac contributed to the burst with his first five points of the night, as Houston shot 5-for-5 to start the period. Now hammering Cleveland down low and on the perimeter, the Rockets lead swelled to as much as 17 late in the quarter and led 72-59 at the end of three. Houston outscored the Cavaliers 32-20 for the period, out-rebounded them 14-5, and hit 6-of-8 from three-point territory in breaking the game open.

Fourth Quarter

The Rockets fell in love with the jump shot early in the fourth, and the jump shot didn't love them back. Houston scored just three points in the first five minutes of the period, and the Cavaliers cut the lead to seven, at 75-68. But that was as close as they got. A pair of Houston buckets pushed the lead back out to double-digits. Cleveland hung around, getting as close as six with a little over three minutes remaining, but that was as close as it got. Houston closed the game with a 9-0 run and took it going away, 92-77.

Odds and Ends

How the game was lost: The same way they usually win-rebounding and defense. Five nights after battering the Clippers' thinned-out frontcourt, the Cavaliers were victims of the same tactic in Houston, as the Rockets out-rebounded Cleveland 55-35, including 17 offensive boards. The Cavaliers also put very little pressure on Houston defensively; the Rockets had a 29-to-9 assist-to-turnover ratio, testament to the ease with which they operated on the offensive end. Only poor shot selection by the Rockets fired up 27 three-pointers, despite being completely dominant down low, kept the Cavaliers in the ballgame.

LeBron's line: 32 points, six assists, and seven rebounds on 12-of-23 shooting. LBJ was the only Cavalier starter to shoot over 50% from the field, which leads us to...

Other heroes: Absolutely no one. Aside from the King, the Cavaliers shot a combined 34.5%, and the only other player in double figures was Larry Hughes, who scored 13 on 6-of-16 from the field (not bad for him). Dwayne Jones in particular showed why he's generally nailed to the end of the bench when the team is at full strength: in 16 minutes, the ex-St. Joseph's Hawk had one block, one personal foul, and nothing else. That kind of ineffectuality is damn near impressive.

Just for good measure: Early in the fourth quarter, Daniel

Gibson left the game with what was described as a "right hamstring strain" by Craig Sager. That's exactly what we need right now- another injury.

Next: at Atlanta Friday night at 7:30. The athletic young Hawks are in line for their first playoff appearance since 1999, have won three straight and defeated the Cavaliers in North Georgia back on January 9. It's a tough match-up, especially on the second night of a back-to-back.