Coming off their inspirational win at Orlando on Monday, the Cavaliers had a golden opportunity to establish a season high-water mark of eight games over .500 and win their fifth straight regular-season contest over a Tony Parker-less Spurs team chugging to the end of their marathon eight-game Rodeo Trip. For three and a half quarters, it seemed like such happy things had a good chance of transpiring. Then, from out of the Argentine, struck a blade-nosed buzzkill: Manu Ginobili & the Spurs 112, Cavaliers 105.

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Game Recap by Quarter

First Quarter

Larry Hughes stayed hot, drilling his first four attempts, including a three-pointer, as the Cavaliers jumped out to an 18-9 lead. Looking slow and ragged from their long road trip, the Spurs started out 4-of-14 from the field; with Manu Ginobili (five early points) the only bright spot in the first few minutes. A Duncan three-point play at 4:01 got San Antonio going, though, and the Spurs ripped off a quick 9-0 run to tie the game at 18. Devin Brown got the Cavaliers off the schneid, pumping in a tough jumper to break the tie, feeding LeBron for a lay-up, and pulling down a rebound and starting a Cleveland possession that ended with another basket by the King, giving the Cavaliers a 24-18 lead at the end of one.

Cleveland controlled the period statistically as well as on the scoreboard, out-shooting the Spurs 55% to 30.4% and winning the rebounding battle 14-10. Larry Hughes led the Cavaliers with 11 first-quarter points; Duncan scored seven for the Spurs, but shot just 2-of-7 from the field.

Second Quarter

The teams played at a brisk pace as the second quarter opened, with Cleveland extending its lead to seven, 29-22. Z's foul trouble, such a factor in Orlando, continued in this game, as the big Lithuanian was forced to the bench with his third personal barely a minute into the period. No matter; with LBJ finding Marshall and Brown for three-pointers, hammering home a Donyell dish, and going into the stratosphere for a put-back, the Cavaliers were in front by eleven, 36-25.

Cleveland led by nine when LeBron went to the bench with just over seven minutes left in the half. A Ginobili three cut the lead to six, but two more jumpers by- guess who- Larry Hughes made it 40-30 Cavaliers, and after a Duncan free throw, a Damon Jones three gave Cleveland its largest lead of the game at twelve with under five minutes left. LeBron re-entered the fray at 3:31 and the Cleveland lead seven- a neutral plus-minus with the King on the bench.

Foul trouble dogged the Cavaliers as the half closed. LeBron picked up his third packing a Duncan lay-up attempt, and got a technical on top of it when he made a display of his displeasure with the call. The Spurs scored the last ten points of the half, and at the break it was 47-46 in favor of the Cavaliers.

Despite being outplayed, San Antonio was hanging around. The Spurs were shooting just 35% had been out-rebounded 25-19, but shot 14-of-17 from the free-throw line to Cleveland's 5-of-9. Ginobili had 18 first-half points; Duncan had 13. Larry Hughes led the Cavaliers with 15 points; LeBron had 13 to go with five rebounds and four assists, and Devin Brown came off the bench to toss in nine.

Third Quarter

Larry Hughes picked up right where he left off, opening the third period with a line-drive three-pointer, and the Cavaliers came out with energy, building the lead back up to line on a 10-2 run in the first three-and-a-half minutes of the half. Manu scored all four of San Antonio's points in the first five minutes of the third. The pattern for the

night continued; after the Cavaliers took a ten-point lead, San Antonio ripped off an 8-0 run to make it a 60-58 game. When Cleveland took it out to 64-58, a three-pointer by the scorching Ginobili, a three-point play by Horry, and Cleveland's second technical of the night (on Gooden) gave the Spurs their first lead of the night, 65-64, with 3:24 left. The Cavaliers spent a nice portion of the night emulating their models from San Antonio with their constant carping with the officials.

Duncan and Z exchanged bank shots, than an acrobatic steal by Devin Brown led to an LBJ lay-up and a regain of the Cavaliers lead, 68-67. After a Cleveland stop, Z found LeBron for an alley-oop that got the crowd fired up and made it 70-69. Seconds later, Hughes's deal with Satan continued as he banked in a three-pointer, giving the Cavaliers a four-point lead. It was 75-71 Cleveland at the end of three, with the Wine & Gold in the middle of an 11-4 run that had the crowd braced for fourth-quarter drama.

Fourth Quarter

As it turned out, Robert Horry had picked up a technical foul arguing a blatant call at the end of the previous period, and the resulting free shot made it 76-71 as the final quarter began. LeBron scored seven points in a little more than two minutes as his team upped the lead to 83-77. Just like that, Ginobili took his total to 30, then 33 on the wide-open three that made it 83-82. Nine games into a road trip, with Pops tie-less and badly in need of a haircut, seemingly one strong Cavs run from oblivion, San Antonio had the nerve to flash its championship mettle instead of just dying already, and it was all on the back of the blade-nosed assassin from Argentina.

Duncan's hook put the Spurs back in the lead, 86-85 with 7:32 left. One minute later, Donyell took a bullet pass from LBJ and buried a three. It was 88-86 Cavaliers with a little more than half a quarter left, and folks, we had a barnburner. Three for Bowen; three for LeBron; three for Ginobili all in succession, making it 92-91 Spurs. San Antonio prospered on penetration, dish, and dropped dagger, Ginobili, making it 100-95 Spurs on a trey with 3:51 left. San Antonio now had six three-pointers in the period. A minute later, Manu made it seven, and a 103-95 San Antonio lead with a bomb from far beyond the top of the key. Manu Freaking Ginobili now had 42 points on 14-of-19, including 7-of-10 from long-range.

San Antonio made it an eight-point game on two Ginobili free throws (44 points). With 2:22 left, Damon Jones hit a three to make it 105-100. Then the unkindest cut of all: Duncan, on an inbound, finding Ime Udoka so wide open under the hoop that you or I could have made the subsequent lay-up. Moments later, a fourth quarter dominated by San Antonio in brilliant fashion- 14-of-18 shooting, 41 fourth-quarter points- was over, and so was the Rodeo Trip, at a tidy 6-3. Spurs 112, Cavaliers 105.

Bring on the All-Star Break.

Odds and Ends

How the game was lost: It wasn't lost so much as wrenched away by Manu Ginobili. The Argentine's line: 46 points, eight

assists, 15-of-20 from the field, 8-of-11 from three-point range. Not only did Manu score, he created massive opportunities with every relentless drive to the cup. He bombed Cleveland's defense from outside, eviscerated it from inside, and generally won the game single-handedly. The Cavaliers scored 30 points in the fourth quarter. Maybe I'm not the most perceptive observer of the hoop game, but it seemed to me that our boys played pretty well. The offense broke down a little bit in the fourth as guys dribbled around aimlessly and chucked up jumpers while the Spurs moved the ball, but it should have been enough.

LeBron's line: 39 points, nine assists, six rebounds. He had 18 in the fourth period

Other heroes: Larry Hughes went for 26 on 11-of-19, including 4-of-7 on three-pointers, and the three-man bench of Damon, Devin and Donyell scored nine apiece, but neither Ilgauskas nor Gooden got it going; Z, dogged by foul problems, had just six and three in 27 minutes, and Drew just had an ineffectual offensive night: 2-of-8 for seven points (and a respectable 11 rebounds). Neither was able to establish a frontcourt offensive presence in the fatal fourth quarter.

Next: Six days from tonight, February 19, when the Houston Rockets come to town to start the second half.