No matter the sport, no matter who the opponent; if you dig yourself a deep early hole on the road, it's tough to climb out. The Wine & Gold got a refresher course in this age-old truism on Wednesday night at the Building Formerly Known as Brendan Byrne Arena. The New Jersey Nets had a 23-6 lead midway through the first half, led by as many as 19 in the second half, and although LeBron and Co. got to within one late in the game, they never led in a somewhat exasperating 104-99 loss.

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Game Recap

First Quarter

New Jersey rushed out to a 13-3 lead three minutes into the game. While the Cavaliers settled almost exclusively for jumpers, the Nets

rolled to the basket with a vengeance. New Jersey made its first nine shots, didn't miss from the field until the 6:10 mark, and led by 17 on two different occasions during the first period. After a while, New Jersey decided to mix in some outside bombs with their point-blank shots, and those fell too. The Nets hit 14 of their first 16 from the floor, and until nearly the two-minute mark, the only Net to miss was The Vince Carter. The Cavaliers, with Ben Wallace out, were versatile on defense- awful on the perimeter, and awful in the paint. To add insult to injury, The Vince picked off an LBJ pass with five seconds remaining and turned it into a buzzer-beating lay-up. At the end of one gruesome period, the Cavaliers were losing on the boards 11-4, yielding 77 percent shooting, and getting shellacked on the scoreboard, 38-23.

Second Quarter

The Nets quickly built their lead back up to 17 at 40-23 before the Cavaliers stemmed the bleeding with an 8-2 run to cut the lead to 11. The effort and defense were better in the second quarter (it couldn't have gotten much worse in the first) and when Szczerbiak, having a solid half, converted a three-point play with 5:21 left, the deficit was back to single digits for the first time since early in the first quarter. On the ensuing possession, LeBron blocked a Richard Jefferson shot and converted a three-point play on the other end to cut the deficit to six, 46-40. LBJ augmented the three-point play with a free throw and a heat-check three off the break, giving him seven straight points and drawing his team to within five. That was as close as it got, and at intermission, the Nets led, 58-47.

All things considered, it could have been worse. Cleveland outscored New Jersey 24-20 in the second and held the Nets to a manageable 45

percent from the field to at least stay within shouting distance. LeBron, spending time at power forward and posting up more than usual, had 22. Wally World (seven points, five assists) and Devin Brown (ten points) had played well. But Joe Smith looked a lot worse as a starter than as a reserve, shooting just 1-of-4, and the newly returned Sasha Pavlovic was a factor only on the negative side- zero points and a plus-minus of -15.

Third Quarter

It was the first quarter all over again early in the third. New Jersey tore off a 10-0 run after the Cavaliers scored first, and just like that the Nets lead was a game-high 19, 68-49. Like in the first period, the lane was a hardwood Autobahn to Jersey big men. Josh Boone went unimpeded for a throw-down when Andy gambled on a pass and lost; when Boone tried it again midway through the period, LBJ sent him to the floor with an authoritative hard foul, and for the time being, the tide turned. Cleveland cut the lead back to nine at the three-minute mark. Instrumental to the run was Devin Brown, who scored seven points in the period.

Unfortunately, it took Jersey less than a minute-and-a-half to extend it right back out to 14. And when LeBron chunked two free throws, fought down the rebound, and front-ironed a three-pointer, the Nets led 80-67 after three.

Fourth Quarter

The fourth began with a couple of key ingredients for Cavalier success- hustle at both ends from Sideshow Bob, and the accustomed theatrics from LBJ. Andy drew offensive fouls on R-Jeff and The Vince to go with a pair of lay-ins, on a put-back off a Joe Smith miss, LeBron knocked down three jumpers, including a Kobe-esque quail for a three-point-play attempt (which he failed to convert) and it was 85-79. A driving bucket by Devin Brown and LeBron's clean-up of Andy's sloppy lay-up attempt made it 88-83. A three by Damon Jones off an LBJ feed made it 88-86. With 5:51 left, LeBron picked up his fifth foul, and Richard Jefferson hit two free throws to extend the lead to four. Damon Jones responded with another three- 90-89. Cleveland had two attempts to take the lead, but Devin Brown charged on a lay-up and LeBron's circus 28-footer went front-rim. With 4:01 left, it was 92-89. The Cavaliers had trailed for the first 43:59.

Cleveland stayed behind, because it couldn't stay out of its own way offensively. Turnovers by LeBron and Andy led to run-out buckets for New Jersey, and it was 96-91. With New Jersey running multiple defenders at LeBron, it was up to the supporting cast, and Andy dumped in a lay-up off a nice feed from Devin Brown to make it 96-93. A three-pointer by Devin Harris, not exactly a long-range specialist, made it 99-93 with 1:26 left. After a couple of wasted possessions on each side, Delonte West canned a three at 46.8 to make it 99-96. Harris missed on the other end, and at 16.7, LeBron was fouled going to the basket. Points number 40 and 41 for LBJ made him the club's second-leading scorer all-time... and made the score 99-98.

LeBron James somehow finds a way to make every game interesting, no matter how irretrievable it can seem.

Marcus Williams, an 82-percent foul shooter, went to the line for New Jersey at 15.4 He bounced the first one in. The second rimmed out... but The Vince snatched the offensive rebound and was fouled, Varejao's sixth. Two from The Vince made it 102-98. The Vince tripped LeBron on the way down-court. LeBron, needing both, went back-iron on the first and put in point number 42 on the second. With 11.1 to go, it was 102-99. The Vince salted it away with two more free throws. Comeback over, game over- New Jersey 104, Cleveland 99.

Odds and Ends

How the game was lost: The horrendous first quarter was obviously the biggest culprit. Lesser evils were the Nets' early-third quarter run, a combined ten points and eleven assists from starters Joe Smith and Delonte West, an unconscious night by Bostjan Nachbar (21 points and 3-of-4 from downtown), generally questionable defense, and Cleveland's ball-security issues, especially down the stretch. The Cavaliers committed 17 turnovers, three of them in the critical last three minutes, when an improbable comeback victory was well within reach.

LeBron's line: 42 points on 12-of-23 from the field and 16-of-23 from the line, 11 rebounds, and seven assists. Not much to complain about with a line like this, although the King's recent three-point feast did go a little bit fallow- he hit just 2-of-7 from sniper's range.

Other heroes: Devin Brown came off the bench to score 19 points, hitting all four of his three-point attempts, and also pitched in with seven rebounds and five assists. In the words of Bill Raftery, Devin is a solid competitor. Damon Jones hit for 12, including a couple of clutch fourth-quarter threes, and Andy was decent with nine and nine before fouling out. With Wally World scoring all of his points in one quarter, Joe Smith ineffectual, and the rust-covered Sasha getting yanked out after nine minutes like a bad vaudeville comedian, that was pretty much it for non-LeBron laudables.

Next: Thursday night at 7:30, when the Cavaliers head to the Nation's Capital to take on the Artists Formerly Known as the Washington Bullets.