The Pistons' win over the Toronto Raptors yesterday afternoon sealed the Cavaliers' fate for the opening round of the playoffs, partially. For the third straight year the Cavaliers will meet the Washington Wizards in the first round of the Eastern Conference Playoffs. All that is left to be decided is whether or not the Cavs will have home court advantage over their rival. Beating Miami last night helped take them a step closer to home court, and Nick tells us about the win in today's piece.

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The situation was this: the Cavaliers had three games remaining while the Wizards had only a pair. Any combination of two Cleveland wins or Washington losses would lock the Cavs into that number four seed, ensuring them home court advantage for at least the first round. Considering that the Cavaliers were playing .667 basketball inside the friendly confines of The Q (entering Sunday), and just .425 on the road, that extra home game could prove vital to the Clevelanders. A match up with the rudderless Miami Heat, sans Dwyane Wade and Shawn Marion and sporting an NBA-worst 14-65 mark was nothing short of a blessing for the struggling Cavs, who are limping to the regular season's finish line for the second straight season.

Recap

First Quarter

First blood was drawn by the Cavaliers when Ben Wallace kicked the ball out to a wide open Delonte West, who drained a three. West's three-point shot has vastly improved over the last few weeks. At the 7:30 mark the Heat tied the game at seven, clearly not packing it in despite having a very young and relatively talent-depleted roster.

While the Heat were unable to trot out a very skilled team, they definitely played hard, because frankly hustle is going to be the difference between making an NBA roster and spending a career in the D-League for many of their players (in fact, the Heat presently have seven players on the roster who spent time in the D-League this season).

After a LeBron James three-point play, a trey from former Buckeye Daequan Cook evened the score at 10. On one possession, Zydrunas Ilgauskas had a comical number of tips in an effort to corral an offensive rebound, but was unable to do so. Perhaps due to this failure, Austin Carr passed on a prime opportunity to tell fans that Z is "the best tip drill man in the league."

A Daniel Gibson three and a pair of Ilguaskas free throws gave the Cavs a five point edge as the final third of the quarter commenced. Daqequan Cook served as a one-man offense for the Heat, scoring 11 of Miami's first 19 points with a fine display of jump shooting. Miami finished with a flurry, outscoring the Cavs 7-0 during the final two minutes of the quarter. A six-footer off the glass from Earl Barron gave the Heat a two-point lead (21-19) at the quarter's closing, and served as a reminder that this Miami team was not going to roll over and be the Cavaliers' doormat.

Second Quarter

The Cavs' opening possession of the second quarter was marked by a Wally Szczerbiak shot clock violation. A quick aside: will someone please bench this man? A sweet Joe Smith jumper from the baseline tied the game at 21. LeBron spent a good portion of the second quarter nursing his ailing back, a back that has grown weary of carrying 11 other players game after game.

An Earl Barron hook shot squared the score at 24 with just over 8 minutes to play, and the Heat continued to hang around. The Cavs didn't have much offensive leadership during the first half of the second quarter with LeBron James and Delonte West on the bench. If I'm scouting the Cavaliers, that definitely sticks out. Cleveland scored only eight points in six minutes to open the second.

The return of Ilgauskas, James, and West provided the Cavaliers with the proverbial shot in the arm. The Cavs opened a 35-28 lead, a run highlighted by a three from West and an emphatic fast break dunk from James that brought the crowd roaring to their feet. But once again, the Heat just continued to hang around, as they answered with five straight points to cut that lead to 35-33. Heading into the break, the Cavs led 40-38.

Third Quarter

As the quarter began, FSN Ohio displayed a graphic indicating that the Heat are 4-39 against winning teams this season, with their last victory over such a club coming on December 22 against the Utah Jazz. Fox's game editor should have followed said graphic with another that read: "(These guys suck.)"

A Ricky Davis three allowed the Heat to regained the lead (45-43) with 10 minutes to play. The Cavaliers were having trouble both hitting open jump shots and establishing an inside presence, and such problems usually don't translate into boatloads of points.

LeBron James tied the game once again with a pair of freebies, but five minutes into the second half the Cavaliers had scored just five

points and trailed 47-45. Zydrunas Ilgauskas finally broke out of his dry spell to hit a jumper, making the score 47 all.

Austin Carr commented that the Cavaliers couldn't find a rhythm, and anyone watching the game would be inclined to agree. Whenever something positive happened for the home team, they were unable to build on that success to generate any separation.

There was no shortage of ties and lead changes tonight, and an Anderson Varejao layup tied the game once more, this time at 53. As the quarter wound down, two consecutive baskets by Devin Brown tied the game at 57 until Chris Quinn slashed inside to give the Heat a two-point lead. At the end of the third, the Cavs trailed the Heat 59-57.

Fourth Quarter

The Cavs shot just 37-percent during the first three quarters, a stat which had to improve if the home team expected to post a win.

With nine minutes to play the Cavaliers held a 62-60 lead following

a Daniel Gibson trey. On the following possession Gibson drew a foul on a three-pointer, a maneuver at which he has become adept this season. Gibson knocked down all three freebies, and combined with an Ilgauskas bucket the Cavs had opened up a 67-60 lead with about 8 minutes to play.

A couple of Anderson Varejao baskets (one of which was not pretty) gave the Cavs a 71-63 lead with less than 6 minutes to play. Two AV free throws made the Cleveland advantage 10 points with 5:00 remaining.

Joe Smith did a terrific job filling the lane and drew a blatant charge on Chris Quinn, giving the Cavaliers the basketball with 3:30 to play and a 76-65 lead. If we learned anything about this incarnation of the Heat tonight, it's that they don't quit. Ricky Davis hit a three to cut the Cavalier lead to 76-70, making it a two possession game with 2:33 to go.

Somehow a LeBron James layup rolled out, but Ilgauskas was there for the tip in (possibly offensive goaltending), and Austin Carr was there to remind us that nothing has changed since Wednesday; Z is still the best tip drill man in the league. Mark Blount's jumper shrunk the lead to six and kept Miami alive. Blount was on fire (get it?) late in the game, and he managed to draw a foul on the subsequent possession. The Blountman

split his pair of free throws, and the lead was five.

Delonte West missed a jump shot, but Sasha Pavlovic crashed the boards, caught the rebound, and slammed it home in stride. The lead was now seven (80-73) and the Cavs were firmly in control. Miami was forced to foul, and Delonte West hit both free throws to increase the lead to nine.

On the other end, Chris Quinn made a three to keep Miami's comeback hopes on life support. Once again, Delonte West was fouled intentionally, and once again, he was money from the stripe. West's free throw shooting essentially iced the game. Ricky Davis threw up a prayer, Daniel Gibson grabbed a hotly-contested rebound, and the Cavs walked down the tunnel with an 84-76 victory.

Quick Hits

Snowman in the booth. Fred McLeod and Austin Carr welcomed one of the Cavs' several financial albatrosses, Eric Snow, into the broadcasting booth during the second quarter. Snow has one more year on his current contract, and will almost certainly retire when that contract expires. E-Snow seems a lock for some sort of coaching position.

During his quarter in the booth, Snow seemed very sharp. There's no doubt that he knows the game and relates well to the other players. There's no way to know how Snow would handle the X's and O's part of coaching, but he certainly seems prepared for most of the job's other facets. Look for him to catch on as an assistant somewhere and eventually get a shot at a head coaching position.

Strategery. Pat Riley is no dummy, and you can bet he realizes that his present team stinks. How

did Riley try to compensate for that lack of talent? By limiting possessions, not unlike Mike Fratello used to do with some of the mediocre Cavs teams of old. I have no numbers to back this up (so obviously, I'm opening myself to harsh criticism), but basketball inherently seems to determine the superior team more effectively than other sports. In baseball, hockey, and soccer one player (pitcher, goaltender) can get hot and win the game almost single-handedly. In football, the possibility for a high ratio of turnovers to the relatively low number of possessions can cause volatility (see: Browns vs. Bengals, December 23, 2007), giving lousy teams the opportunity to defeat better clubs.

But in basketball, the high number of possessions and therefore, scoring opportunities, means that it's very hard to "luck" your way into a victory. Likewise, one player can't decide the outcome of the game on his own. Even an all-world superstar like Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, or Rasho Nesterovic (if you caught that you're still

awake) will typically only score about one-third of his team's points. These two factors mean that over the course of a 48-minute game, things tend to go in favor of the best team, ceteris paribus.

Getting back to my original point, by slowing the game down and thereby reducing the number of possessions, Riles is hoping that his team can hang tough for three quarters, and then maybe pull it out with hustle and luck in the fourth. That strategy almost worked tonight.

"You don't need to put me on the bench." Wally Szczerbiak must be pulling some sort of Jedi mind trick on Mike Brown, because that's the only explanation for Wally World seeing double digit minutes in a meaningful game. What does this guy have to do to get benched? Prior to being traded to Cleveland, we all knew that

Wally's defense was, to put it lightly, sub-par. Nothing has changed since he's taken up residence on the North Shore.

Szczerbiak's saving grace has always been his ability to make jump shots and flat out score the basketball. But Szczerbiak seems unable to score with any regularity or efficiency at this point. Wally came into Sunday's game shooting 35.6-percent (36.5 from downtown) in Wine & Gold. There's no reason to pull punches anymore; Wally Szczerbiak *is*
Jiri Welsch. The only reason the fans aren't screaming for Mike Brown's job whenever Wally checks into the game is because the guy went to school in Ohio.

Compound Szczerbiak's gratuitous allotments of playing time with the fact that Sasha Pavlovic and

Damon Jones can't *buy* their way onto the floor, and you have yourself a paradox. Jones is shooting 42.3-percent from beyond the arc, and is no more of a defensive liability than Szczerbiak. Something's got to give. I've made up my mind. Szczerbiak *must* be using a Jedi mind trick. He probably had great success buying booze and cigarettes in high school, as well. " *You don't need to see my identification."*

A little help from his friends. LeBron James scored just 13 points tonight, shooting only 9 times. But the Cavs were able to bother the Heat on defense, and LeBron's supporting cast did just enough to seal the victory. Six Cavaliers scored nine points or more, including a strong 18-point effort from Delonte West, who is getting more comfortable in Mike Brown's offense by the day.

“Sweet” is the new sour. There is no reason for the Cavaliers to play Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" during halftime every game, trying to make it into some kind of forced tradition. This isn't Fenway Park, and this isn't the middle of the eighth inning. After last October, being reminded of the Boston Red Sox is the last thing I'm looking for at The Q.

He's not one of my favorite artists, but some of Neil Diamond's stuff is really good, and "Sweet Caroline" is a tune with a high karaoke value. That said, let's find our own damn song.

My suggestion: Run DMC's “Down With the King ." It's a solid rap track (even if the group had passed their prime at the time of the album's release), it’s topically relevant as long as LeBron James is in C-Town, and Eric

"Eazy-E" Wright even shows up to assist D.M.C, Jam-Master Jay, and Rev Run, so there's a Browns tie-in. Another positive: it's over four minutes of Ahmad Crump not yelling at me. Danny Ferry, make this happen.

Digiorno Pizza® Austin Carr Quote of the Game: "[The Cavs] have to understand they are a blue collar team, Fred. They are not a Hollywood glare, LA Laker kind of team. This team, they need floor burns, they need knockin' people down, that's who they are. That's how they got to the situation they got into last year. But now all of the sudden nobody is going to put it on the line and I don't understand that."

A buddy of mine dispelled the silly notion the "blue collar" sports cliché really is. Floor burns and knocking people down were not what got the Cavs into the Finals last season. They were propelled into the Finals by a favorable path through the bracket (Washington and New Jersey in rounds one and two, respectively), outstanding team defense, and the presence of LeBron James, arguably the most dominant player in the game. As much as Michael Stanley's old tune might suggest that the Cavs get it done "with sweat and hustle," most NBA teams play hard (this is particularly true in the playoffs), and neither a vastly superior level of effort nor a figurative collar hue (not even a ""pinkish hue") fueled the Cavaliers' 2007 playoff run.

The Cleveland Cavaliers will return: Tomorrow, when they travel to the Quaker City to meet the suddenly surging Philadelphia 76ers. The resurgent Sixers have won 14 of their last 21, and should provide a good test for the Cavaliers as they look to lock up the Eastern Conference's fourth seed with a win. Tip off time is 7:00 at the Wachovia Center.