The Cavaliers didn't have to do anything special to win on Wednesday night. They didn't need to be exceptional. A middling effort would have sufficed to knock out the Wizards and end this first-round series. But the display the Cavaliers put on was a long, long way from middling. They shot 36 percent, blew lay-ups and wide-open looks from the perimeter, committed unforced mistakes with the ball, were beaten on the offensive glass and to loose balls, played a horrible first half, and in the final insult, pissed away a five-point lead in the last minute-and-a-half to lose 88-87.

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Game Recap

The first-half effort tonight out of the Cavaliers was, in a word, stunning. It's difficult to believe a team with a chance to close out a series on its home floor- especially against a team it so roundly dislikes and disrespects- can come out and play so brutally bad on both sides of the ball in the first 24 minutes. While the Cavaliers committed turnovers- a

couple by Z were really egregious- and couldn't hit the ocean with a beach ball on offense, they stood around on defense and watched as Washington shot over 50 percent for the first half. Cleveland was lucky to only trail by two at halftime.

The Cavaliers finally got their defensive intensity cranked up in the third quarter. They embarked on an 11-0 run to go from a 53-48 deficit to a 59-53 lead with 5:13 to go in the period. At this point, with the capacity crowd howling in delight, they had a chance to take control of the game. They didn't. Instead, in what proved a critical turning point, they allowed the Wizards not one, not two, not three, but four offensive rebounds, culminating in an Antawn Jamison lay-up that ended a string of 13 consecutive Washington misses and touched off an 18-6 run that gave the Wizards a 71-65 lead early in the fourth quarter.

The second, and fatal, turning point came in the last two minutes. A Delonte West three-point play- one of a precious few fast-break capitalizations by Cleveland on the night- had given the Cavaliers an 87-82 lead with 1:47 left. After Joe Smith snuffed out a Darius Songaila drive and Z grabbed the rebound, the Cavaliers had the ball back with 1:40 left, needing only one more bucket to effectively end the game and with it the series.

They never got it. Instead they frittered away the lead and the game in a chain reaction of missed opportunities and bad plays. Cleveland had four possessions inside the last minute-and-a-half, all of which came up empty:

- **On the first** of the final four possessions, the Cavaliers went to the

set that has become painfully familiar to fans that have sat through three seasons of Mike Brown's brand of offensive basketball: isolating LeBron James outside the three-point line while his teammates stand around and watch. For some reason, LBJ- who was decidedly passive all night- didn't put the ball on the floor, collapse the defense, and at least attempt to draw a foul or find an open shooter. Instead, in a display of prevent offense that would have made Marty Schottenheimer proud, he dribbled out the shot clock and with 1:16 left launched a three-pointer that didn't came close. The Wizards rebounded and with 1:05 left, Caron Butler- a monster all evening- cut the lead to 87-84.

- **On the second possession**, the Cavaliers again worked down the shot clock. This time LeBron found Daniel Gibson wide open on the wing for a three-point attempt that would have put the game away. Instead, Boobie missed, and in the ensuing scramble, Joe Smith bumped Antonio Daniels, who hit two free throws to cut the lead to one with 43 seconds left. That play was a killer- instead of making Washington earn points, they got a foul 90 feet from the basket and a chance to score points with the clock stopped. It was quite simply a wretched basketball play by Joe Smith, a veteran who really ought to know better.
- **On the third possession,** Cleveland finally got a good look at the basket. But Smith failed from point-blank range, Z missed a tip-in that he makes 80, 90 percent of the time (sorry, channeling Austin Carr), and Washington ultimately got the rebound with 11 seconds left. Butler's drive and score put the Wizards in the lead with 3.9 to go.
- **On Cleveland's final possession,** LeBron drove to the hole, was bumped with no call (nor should there have been one), and missed basically the same shot Butler had made a few seconds earlier. And that was it.

The Cavaliers were in a similar situation last year in the second round against New Jersey- at home with a chance to close it out in Game Five- and also lost. But they were blown out in that game. This game hurts a lot more, because it was so, so, *so* winnable.

You know, I don't like to get into the "woe is me, I'm a Cleveland fan" stuff. I think it's a waste of energy and invites a counterproductive mindset. But a game like Wednesday's makes me wonder- if only for a moment- why I bother to expend so much energy, passion, and temper on this city's teams, only to be rewarded with frustration and disappointment, seemingly every time.

Of course, I'll be right back at it tomorrow, rooting my heart out. It's who I am, it's who we are. Call it a sickness, call it an addiction- we can't eat enough of this &%$# sandwich.

Odds and Ends

How the game was lost: 36 percent shooting. 13 turnovers. (I'm actually surprised the number was that low; I was convinced coming out of the game that the Cavaliers had committed more in the neighborhood of 20.) A mere 40-39 rebounding edge over a team that Cleveland usually hammers on the glass, including the ceding of some absolutely crucial offensive boards at a pivotal point in the third quarter. Cavaliers players aside from LeBron and Z shot 25.5 percent, and for whatever reason, Cleveland didn't pound the ball down low to the big fella after Brendan Haywood fouled out late in the fourth quarter. And give credit where its due- Caron Butler was splendid, with 32 points. They never figured out a way to stop him. It looks as if Eddie Jordan has finally got it in his head to exploit the match-up advantage Butler has over Wally

Szczerbiak. And that isn't good news. Worse, Gilbert Arenas won't be playing the rest of the series- and the Wizards at this point are considerably better without Zero than with him.

LeBron's line: 34 points on 8-of-21 shooting, with 10 rebounds, seven assists, and two blocks. I don't think LeBron played well, despite the requisite shiny stat-line. He turned the ball over five times, didn't go to the hole with his usual reckless abandon and just wasn't aggressive enough in a close-out game. Usually LeBron is good for two or three spectacular, momentum-changing plays. On Wednesday he made, by my count, one- the dunk that put Cleveland up 74-73 in the fourth quarter. The numbers by themselves are more than acceptable. But they were quiet numbers.

Other heroes: Other than Ilgauskas (19 points on 8-of-11, and even he was way too soft on the boards, gathering just six rebounds), Cleveland's support staff flat-out laid down on the job. Anderson Varejao was 1-of-6, and once again spent way too much time with the ball in his hands. Daniel Gibson started out 3-of-3 and missed his last five shots. Joe Smith missed all six of his shots, including some bunnies, and committed that horrendous foul in the final minute that helped seal Cleveland's fate.

And Wally Sczcerbiak deserves special mention, because he

was worse than bad. In 18 atrocious minutes, Wally World hit 1-of-6 shots, committed four turnovers, blew a wide-open lay-up off a fast break, and was absolutely torched on the defensive end by Caron Butler. It was truly a double-agent performance, a triumph of awful, awful basketball by a man who is rapidly becoming a serious liability in Cleveland's rotation.

Next: Game Six, tentative time 7:00 PM Eastern, in what is sure to be a raucous Verizon Center in Washington D.C. As the late, great Gib Shanley used to say, it's time to get nervous.