Combining an overpowering interior game with timely outside shooting (as well as some guy named Kobe Bryant), Los Angeles trounced the Cavs last night, 105-88, at the Staples Center. The 17 point margin of defeat was the largest for the Cavs this season. The loss dropped Cleveland to 31-8 on the season and knocked them out of the top spot in the Eastern Conference (Orlando now holds that honor at 33-8). John Hnat gives us The Good, The Bad, & The Summary on last night's loss.

## THE SUMMARY:

It was the irresistible force against the immovable object. The Lakers' top-ranked offense against the Cavs' stingy defense.

The irresistible force won.

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The loss dropped Cleveland to 31-8 on the season and knocked them out of the top spot in the Eastern Conference (Orlando now holds that honor at 33-8).

Cleveland still owns an 8.5 game lead over Detroit in the division, in case that is any consolation.

The game was actually close well into the third quarter - the Cavs even had the lead at halftime, at 50-49 - but the Lakers pulled away and led by 18 points midway through the fourth quarter. A valiant 11-0 flurry brought the Cavs to within seven points with three and a half minutes to go, but they would get no closer.

LeBron James led all players with 23 points (although it took him 25 shots to get those points), and four other Cavs made it into double figures. Pau Gasol was the Lakers' top scorer with 22.

Bryant had 20 points and out-LeBroned LeBron with a dozen assists.

It's the NBA. Where road trips happen.

## WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

**Hmmm, I Wonder If He Knows He's In L.A.:** Make the stage bigger, and LeBron will play that much bigger. Although he had a rough night overall, he still had his share of highlight-quality plays.
Early in the game, he hit a three-pointer, then an absolutely sick turnaround jumper.

He also had another "chasedown" blocked shot, obliterating a layup attempt by the Lakers' Sasha Vujacic.

In the third quarter, he had a huge left-handed dunk in traffic.

Even on those nights when he does not have his best stuff, LeBron is still good for multiple highlight-reel-quality plays.

**Some Love For The Other Side:** Those plays aside, LeBron did not have an easy time last night, and Bryant was a huge reason why. Kobe took it as a personal challenge to stop LeBron (okay,
*contain*
LeBron), and James's 9 of 25 shooting line shows that Kobe was largely successful.

(Actually, the good defense went both ways, as James harassed Bryant into a 9 of 22 shooting night.)

It's probably worth mentioning that Kobe injured the ring finger on his right hand just moments into the game, apparently dislocating it as he swiped at the ball while it was in LeBron's hands. (That play led to one of the more bizarre sequences I've seen recently.

Bryant was holding his hand, away from the action, while the Cavs had the ball for about a minute thanks to a series of missed shots and offensive rebounds.

Still not sure why one of the Lakers did not just commit a foul in order to stop the action and get Kobe attended to.)

**One Game's A Fluke. Two Games Is ... A Larger Fluke?:** My love for the game of Sasha Pavlovic is well-documented. As in, I don't have any.

I just cannot get excited about the guy's "potential" when he has been wildly inconsistent for years.

That said, Sasha is playing some quality ball these days. Following up on his 19 point outburst against New Orleans last Friday, Sasha scored a dozen points, although he seemed to run out of gas in the second half. He made some (dare I say it) heady plays, including a drive and dish to Anderson Varejao in the first half, an alert steal after having a shot blocked.

Perhaps most impressively, he has now played almost 80 minutes in the past two games and has had only one turnover.

**The Man-Child Continues Becoming A Man:** J.J. Hickson had another notable performance, scoring 11 points and grabbing four rebounds in just under 20 minutes of action.

He had a huge block on the Lakers' Lamar Odom in the first half, and later had another block against Kobe himself.

We are getting to the point in the season where most rookies, having ventured into new territory in terms of number of games played, start hitting the wall.

If anything, Hickson is getting stronger.

## WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

**The Story Of The Game:** Why did the Lakers win last night? Because they owned the Cavs in the paint. Gasol and Andrew Bynum were able to score almost at will against Cleveland's front line (they shot a combined 17 of 23 from the field and scored 36 points; yeah, that's a good night).

It did not matter who the Cavs had on their front line - Varejao, Ben Wallace, Hickson, Lorenzen Wright, Nate Thurmond - the Lakers' big men had their way with them all.

**The Sub-Story Of The Game:** As part of that dominance, the Lakers had 17 offensive rebounds, leading to approximately one jillion second chance points.

**Hmmm, I Wonder If He Knows He's In L.A.:** Just as LeBron can make big plays on the big stage, so too can he press too hard in trying to put on a show.

In the first quarter, Bron attempted a near-impossible shot - falling out of bounds, just inside the three-point line.

Several other times, he tried to respond to plays by Bryant with plays of his own.

The final killer was with five minutes remaining in the game, when James launched a bomb from several feet beyond the three-point arc (which missed) in a desperate attempt to keep a Cleveland surge going.

That may just be part of the superstar mentality - if an opposing star makes a good play, then you have to respond with one of your own. Sometimes, that desire gets in the way. Last night was one of those times.

**Just Sayin':** The Cavs from the free throw line: 12 of 19 (63%). (Not that the Lakers fared much better, as they shot an absolutely Shaqtastic 7 of 15 from the stripe.

And yes, "Shaqtastic" is a word; see that commercial with Shaquille playing Scrabble if you do not believe me.)

**It *Sounded* Like A Good Play:** As a Cavs fan, one of my pet peeves is the Fox Sports Ohio Missed Play. Once per game, on average, FSO will miss live action in order to show some video from a prior game, or a graphic, or something else that has nothing to do with the game being played.

TNT took it to a new level last night, missing a second quarter three-pointer by Daniel Gibson so that they could continue interviewing Eric McCormack, better known as "the dude from *Wil l and Grace"*
, who now is starring in a new show on (surprise!) TNT.

Okay, if it were my network, I'd probably do the same cheesy cross-promotions ... but is it really too much to expect to see the entire game?

**Yes, I Am Immature:** I cannot stand the Lakers' Vujacic. I am not sure if it is his greasy hair, his physical (and sometimes cheap) play, or (
*you never can tell*
) his tendency to drain three pointers against the Cavs.

Whatever the reason, he is in the Andres Nocioni Hall Of Players I Want To Punch In The Nose.

I'm not sure why I feel so strongly about it, but there you have it.

## NOT THAT YOU ASKED, BUT...

**A Brief, And Very Cold, Rant:** As you know if you live in northeast Ohio, it has been very cold recently - the coldest it has been here in 15 years. Bitterly cold weather makes the usually mundane task of pumping gas much more challenging.

I tried to put it off as long as I could, knowing that I was going to freeze in the cold; but when the little display that tells the estimated remaining distance until hitting empty is measured in feet rather than miles, you can't put it off any longer.

I delayed filling my tank because pumping your gas is becoming an ever more complex procedure. Time was when you slid your credit card reader, filled up your tank, and then you were on your way. Now, it's more like this:

LITTLE GAS PUMP COMPUTER: Please insert credit card.

GBS: (*Inserts card.*)

LGPC: (*Must be taking a coffee break, because it is several moments before it responds*) Would you like to buy a car wash?

GBS: (*Sure, I want to buy a car wash on a -10 degree day, and turn my vehicle into a Fordsicle* ) No.

LGPC: (*Considers my answer with the same depth of thought usually reserved for deep philosophical questions* ) Are you sure you don't want to buy a car wash?

GBS: (*Now unable to feel my toes*) NO!

LGPC: (*Is apparently discussing my answer with the other gas pumps at the station, because several more moments elapse* ) Please enter your ZIP code.

GBS: 64352879783780

LGPC: Invalid entry; please try again.

GBS: (*thinking, "let's see YOU try to enter a number on a tiny keypad when you are wearing thick gloves straight out of L.L. Bean's "Polar Explorer" catalog"* ) 44149

LGPC: (*sings the entire lyrics of "99 Bottles of Beer" to itself before responding*) Please select the grade of gasoline.

GBS: (c*ollapses from hypothermia*)

LGPC: Can I interest you in a car wash?

**Getting Serious For A Moment:** History will be made today. A part of that history is that we are one more large step on the way to no longer having the first black
*anything*
.

And that's the world we should want our kids to live in.

## WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The road trip continues tomorrow night in Portland (ten bucks says that the road outside the arena has not been renamed "Darius Miles Way") and continues in Golden State on Friday (same joke, but insert "Baron Davis") and Utah on Saturday (lather, rinse, and repeat, this time with "Carlos Boozer").