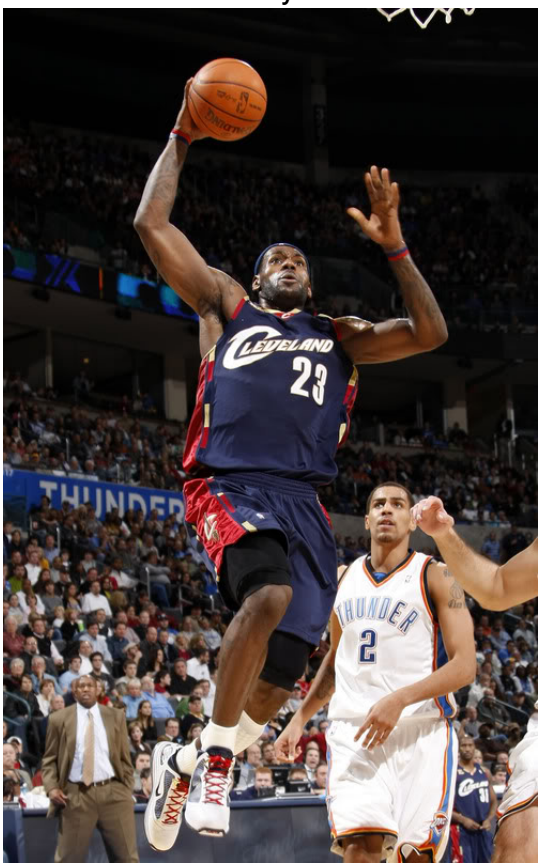
In a battle between two of the NBA's brightest young stars, LeBron James proved the better man- and more importantly, the Cleveland Cavaliers proved the better team. LeBron's 44 points, Mo Williams' late heroics, and an inspired fourth-quarter defensive effort were the difference as the Cavaliers overcame the spirited Thunder, 102-89 in Oklahoma City Sunday night. After a pair of ugly road losses to Western teams early in the week, Cleveland rose to the challenge of the up-and-coming Thunder and did it with character, repeatedly coming from behind against an Oklahoma City team that looked close to breaking it open on several occasions.



In a battle between two of the NBA's brightest young stars, LeBron James proved the better man- and more importantly, the Cleveland Cavaliers proved the better team. LeBron's 44 points, Mo Williams' late heroics, and an inspired fourth-quarter defensive effort were the difference as the Cavaliers overcame the spirited Thunder, 102-89 in Oklahoma City Sunday night. After a pair of ugly road losses to Western teams early in the week, Cleveland rose to the challenge of the up-and-coming Thunder and did it with character, repeatedly coming from behind against an Oklahoma City team that looked close to breaking it open on several occasions.

The Cavaliers aren't playing with a great deal of consistency or precision right now. But they're 17-7, they lead the Central Division by five full games, and

they've still got 58 games left to iron out the kinks. In the meantime, winning is all that matters- especially when, as on Sunday night, it appears that a win isn't necessarily in the cards.

LeBron's Line: 44 points on 16-of-29 from the field, 5-of-8 from three-point range and 7-of-10 from the line with seven rebounds, six assists, four steals and a spectacular chase-down block on the unfortunate Thabo Sefolosha. Troubled by turnovers for much of the season, LeBron took good care of the basketball on Sunday night, committing only one miscue. Moreover, his clutch shooting late in the third quarter helped gobble up a seven-point Cavalier deficit and turn the tide of a back-and-forth game in their favor once and for all.

LeBron may have been motivated by the presence of the gifted Kevin Durant, who came into the night ranked just ahead of him at number-two among NBA scorers with 28.3 points per game to LBJ's 28.2. There certainly seemed to be an extra bounce in the Akronite's step, epitomized by a playful interaction with a young Thunder fan early in the game. After a breakaway lay-up with a foul, LeBron took a French fry from the youngster's plate, than exchanged a high-five with him before going back to work.

Durant's Line: 29 points on 9-of-19 from the field, 2-of-6 from downtown and 9-of-10 from the line with five rebounds, four steals, two assists and a blocked shot. Like the rest of his team Durant went stone-cold in crunch time, failing to score at all in the fourth period, and also committed seven of Oklahoma City's 16 turnovers. Much credit for Durant's relatively poor night must go to Jamario Moon, who did a stellar job on the superstar from Texas, especially late in the game. I like Durant a lot- he's a brilliant scorer, a real throwback to the Alex English's and George Gervin's who lit up the league a quarter-century ago, and seems like he has a great attitude and personality. But he can go off on some other team, not the Cavaliers.

Oklahoma City's two leading scorers, Durant and Russell Westbrook, shot a combined 13-of-34. Their struggles were a major reason the Thunder failed to

come through in a game they very easily could have won.

Thunder Rolls Early: For much of the night, this looked like Oklahoma City's game to loose. Shooting well from the field and beating a path to the free-throw line (they shot 29 freebies to Cleveland's 15) the Thunder controlled the tempo for most of the game's first three periods. Oklahoma City led 29-27 at the end of the first quarter, 54-49 at halftime, and led by as many as eight points. But they couldn't put Cleveland away. Every time it appeared that the Thunder was set to take complete command, the Cavaliers would respond with a quick burst to get right back into it.

LeBron James, as usual, was the catalyst in the Cleveland comeback. Typical of his effort was a sequence late in the second period. After Oklahoma City had built a 52-44 lead, its largest of the night, LeBron responded with a long three-pointer and a monster dunk off a fast break to make it 52-49. The Thunder's failure to press the issue or contain LeBron would ultimately prove its undoing.

One-Man Run: LeBron's most crucial contribution came near the end of the third period, when he single-handedly erased a seven-point Thunder lead and put the Cavaliers in front. With Oklahoma City leading 75-68, LeBron knocked in a technical free throw, buried a three-pointer, than buried another three-pointer to tie the score at 75-apiece. After Durant hit a free throw for his 29th (and final) point of the night, LeBron swished his third three-pointer in barely a minute, this one a bomb from downtown Tulsa, to vault Cleveland into the lead, 78-76. From then on the Cavaliers had control, and although things remained nip-and-tuck for much of the fourth quarter, they never really relinquished it.

Big-Time Board Work: LeBron had given Cleveland control of the game, and its advantage on the glass helped keep that control. The Cavaliers out-rebounded the Thunder 42-36 and grabbed eleven offensive rebounds, the two biggest of which, by Anderson Varejao and Zydrunas Ilgauskas, helped keep a possession alive early in the fourth

quarter with the score tied 82-82. Jamario Moon capitalized by drilling a three-pointer to give Cleveland an 85-82 lead with 8:27 to play. The Cavaliers would keep that lead for the duration.

Defense, Defense, Defense: After not playing particularly airtight defense for much of the night, the Cavaliers really turned the screws in the fourth period- and Oklahoma City obliged with several minutes of absolutely woeful shooting. After a three-pointer by Jeff Green drew the Thunder to within one at 88-87 with 7:17 left, Oklahoma City missed twelve consecutive shots and went nearly seven minutes without a point. Three-pointers, mid-range jumpers, lay-ups and dunks- the Thunder missed them all. By the time Nenad Krstic finally ended the drought on a put-back with 29.9 seconds left, Cleveland led by thirteen and it was all over but the shouting.

Mo Better Clutch-Ness: While Oklahoma City went cold, Mo Williams heated up. The sharpshooter out of Alabama drilled back-to-back three-pointers to keep Cleveland in front early in the fourth quarter, and it was his miracle heave that really put the Thunder down for the count with 4:06 to play.

Shot of the Night: After Mo's second three-pointer in a row staked Cleveland to a 91-87 lead, both teams went scoreless for nearly three minutes. Oklahoma City wasn't hitting anything, but the Cavaliers failed to press the advantage, sabotaging themselves with turnovers and wasted possessions. It looked as if Cleveland's dry spell was going to continue with the clock ticking down to the four-minute mark, as Mo, after chasing down a deflected pass, found himself at half-court with the shot clock running out. All he could do at that point was throw the ball up from nearly fifty feet and hope it hit the rim. It didn't. It went right

through the bottom of the basket to make the score 94-87, and that was for all intents and purposes the ballgame. Mo Williams would finish the night with 22 points- eleven in the fourth period- four assists, and one of the season's most memorable shots.

Other Heroes: LeBron and Mo combined for 66 points and were the only Cavaliers to score in double figures, but Cleveland wouldn't have won without the efforts of Anderson Varejao and Jamario Moon. Varejao had his second consecutive double-digit rebounding night with ten caroms and a team-best +19 in the plus/minus category. Moon chipped in with nine points, including the aforementioned go-ahead-for-good three, and solid defense on Kevin Durant.

Next: The Cavaliers return to the Q on Tuesday night for a 7:00 PM tip-off with the 2-22 New Jersey Nets.