The Cavaliers entered Monday night's game against Phoenix at somewhat of a crossroads. They'd been winning games but not looking particularly good doing it, and on Sunday they lost to a shorthanded Dallas team and didn't look particularly good doing that either. Fortunately, they responded like a legitimate contender would. Combining sharp, aggressive play on the offensive end with a defensive effort that gradually intensified until it suffocated the Suns down the stretch Cleveland dominated Phoenix, shattering its 19-game home winning streak, 109-91. Jesse recaps the win.

The Cavaliers entered Monday night's game against Phoenix at somewhat of a crossroads. They'd been winning games but not looking particularly good doing it, and on Sunday they lost to a shorthanded Dallas team and didn't look particularly good doing that either. Indeed, Cleveland hadn't played a stretch of solid basketball since the first week of December when they wiped out the Mavericks, Suns, Bulls and Bucks by an average margin of more than 15 points. With tilts against improving Sacramento and the all-conquering Lakers still on the road docket, the Cavaliers faced the prospect of losing critical ground on the other Eastern frontrunners if it couldn't get its act together in a hurry.

Fortunately, they responded like a legitimate contender would. Combining sharp, aggressive play on the offensive end with a defensive effort that gradually intensified until it suffocated the Suns down the stretch Cleveland dominated Phoenix, shattering its 19-game home winning streak, 109-91. The Cavaliers hardly resembled the team that had performed so dismally in Dallas the night before. They looked wide-awake, perhaps slapped into consciousness by that embarrassing display against the Dirk-less Mavericks. If they stay conscious Wednesday night in Sacramento, they'll get out of this tough Western swing with a 2-2 record and their dignity, not to mention good position in the Eastern race,

mostly intact (provided their Christmas get-together with the Lake Show isn't a total disaster.)

Anaconda Defense: Old Winfield Scott himself would have been impressed with the way the Cavaliers gradually constricted the vaunted Phoenix offense over the course of Monday night's game. Going in as the highest-scoring team in the NBA at 108.9 points per game, the Suns were limited to their third-lowest output of the season with one of the two lower their 107-90 loss in Cleveland three weeks ago. After scoring thirty points and shooting 61 percent in a torrid first period, Phoenix scored 23 on 41-percent shooting in the second, 22 on 50 percent in the third, and 16 on 35 percent in a lockdown fourth quarter. The Suns shot 47.4 percent for the game, but that solid percentage was offset by a 4-of-21 performance, 18 turnovers and four fast-break points.

Cinching the Knot: Cleveland's defense was at the business end of the 17-1 run that put the game on ice. Phoenix was within six at 92-86 with 6:50 to play, but from then on it was lights-out: 0-of-6 from the field four turnovers in six minutes, one field goal the rest of the way. LeBron personally iced it on the other end with seven points and two assists in the thrust that made it a laughter at 109-87.

Owning the Tempo: After falling behind 40-34 early in the second period the Cavaliers cranked up an 11-2 run to vault themselves into the lead, 45-42. Phoenix would bounce back to retake a 50-49 advantage a few minutes later, but control of the game had been established. When LeBron James converted a three-point play to make it 52-50 Cavaliers with 1:54 left in the half, the Suns were done leading in the game. They would keep it fairly close until midway through the fourth period, drawing even at 65-apiece at one point in the third, but, like the Mavericks the night before, Cleveland kept coming up with answers.

Red on Repeat: When last seen in the Metroplex Sunday night, Delonte West was performing brilliantly in defeat. He gave the same great effort in Phoenix on Monday and this time he was rewarded. Cleveland's crazy glue touched up the Suns for 12 points, six assists, three rebounds, three steals and a block in 28

minutes off the bench. He was catalyst behind that crucial 11-2 second-period run, throwing one down off the break, finding Anthony Parker for the jumper that tied the game, and putting the bowtie on the surge with a tough baseline fade that straightened the net. West's defense was a big factor in the game-long fadeout by Steve Nash. The Mark Price of Canada had eight points and six assists in the first quarter- seven and four the rest of the way. Nash really wasn't a factor at all down the stretch.

Upward Trend: In the last three games Delonte West is averaging 14.3 points, 5.3 rebounds, 4.0 assists and 2.0 steals on 59 percent shooting. Lately he's been more Dennis Johnson than Dennis the Menace and combined with the superb play of Anderson Varejao, the deadeye shooting of Daniel Gibson, the athleticism and defense of Jamario Moon and Z's general Z-ness, gives the Cavaliers a far stronger bench component than they had last year. I'm still kind of thinking this year's team will is better in late May than last year's. I don't see their bench getting slaughtered like in the Orlando series, at least.

Downward Trend: Shaquille O'Neal's output from the Dallas-Phoenix back-to-backer: 38 minutes, 8 points, 13 rebounds, 3-of-10 from the floor. Okay, maybe he isn't saving himself for Phoenix. Maybe he's saving himself for Los Angeles.

Random Thought: There's a better starting center for this basketball team out there. I couldn't tell you who exactly. But there's got to be, right?

Pesky and Bothersome: When Anderson Varejao scores in double digits and annoys opposing big men into temporary insanity, it has to be considered a good thing. Varejao scored 13 points, pulled down 4 rebounds, racked up a +21 and aided Amare Stoudamire to a substandard night: 14 points and six turnovers. Perhaps his best play of the night came with 5:33 left and the Cavaliers leading 97-86, when he blocked Amare's lay-up attempt to trigger a technical foul by the frustrated star. Mo Williams converted the free throw and LeBron followed with a turnaround and a "hero" three-pointer to make it 103-86 with 4:31 left.

Should Be Routine: The Cavaliers did exactly what they should have done against Phoenix's ragged defense: They operated efficiently. Cleveland shot 52.6 percent, shot the three judiciously (12 attempts, well below their nightly average of 17.9), limited their turnovers (12 as opposed to their average of 14.6) and scored 44 points in the paint, many of them off right-down-main-street screen-and-rolls. Normally a 73 percent free-throw shooting team, Cleveland bottomed out the charity shots at a 22-of-26 clip on Monday night.

Bounce-Back Night: In a night of small performances at Dallas, Mo Williams's eight-point, five-assist effort was one of the more Lilliputian. But he came up large on Monday, scoring 24 with 6 rebounds, 5 assists and just one turnover. Eight of his points came in the fourth quarter to help the Cavaliers build their big lead.

We Hold the Deed: Phoenix's 19-game home winning streak was ended by the last team to beat them in U.S. Airways: the Cleveland Cavaliers, who dusted off the Suns 119-111 on March 12th.

Next: Wednesday night at 10:00, when the Cavaliers tip off against the Kings at Arco Arena.