The Lakers came into The Q last night with revenge on their minds against a Cavaliers team missing Mo Williams and Jamario Moon due to injuries and shot out of the gates quick, cruising to a 9-0 lead to start the game. But the Cavaliers, despite the attrition, despite a black hole in the backcourt, despite turnovers, despite second and third looks given up, stayed within contact. Then, with some fierce defense and on the broad backs of a couple of all-time greats, one young, one old, they took over at winning time. They wrested control of the game from Los Angeles down the stretch and came up with perhaps their grittiest win of the season, a 93-87 thriller that gave Cleveland the season sweep. Jesse recaps the win.

The Cavaliers and the Los Angeles Lakers got together Thursday night at the Q for the second game of their yearly home-and-home, the re-match of Christmas Day's Great Foam Finger Caper out at Staples Center. L.A. entered Thursday two games up on Cleveland in the loss column on the overall NBA standings, with a chance to clinch a tie in the season series- and the Cavaliers were without two of the principals in the Yuletide beat-down. Mo Williams (28 points and manhood-questioning-epithets on Lamar Odom) is on the shelf four-to-six weeks with a sprained shoulder and Jamario Moon (13 points on 6-of-7) is still out with his abdominal strain.

Take those personnel losses, add in a first quarter completely dominated by Los Angeles, and it could very easily have become a night to forget for the Cavaliers...

and a critical statement for the Lake Show. To say Cleveland started slowly would have been an understatement- they trailed by 11 at one point in the opening period didn't take their first lead until late in the third. Kobe Bryant and his supporting cast, meanwhile, were all over the glass, the floor and the nets.

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Crowd-Killing Start: The moaning, stumbling zombies in a George Romero movie had more life than the Cavaliers to begin Thursday night's action. Chilly on offense, lethargic on the boards, Cleveland missed its first three shots, coughed up four offensive rebounds and fell behind, 9-0, two minutes in. The capacity crowd at the Q, anticipating a party, had walked in on a wake. They fell accordingly silent. The long uphill climb- and it was a long one- had begun.

Mea Culpa, Pt. XXXVVVIXXXIIIII: Upon hearing that Mo Williams would be lost for this game and many others, I stupidly remarked in a thread on our estimable forums that his absence would be "superfluous." I should have known better. Mo absolutely owns wizened Lakers point guard Derek Fisher, and without him Cleveland's backcourt wheezed to a stop before it got started. Starting guards Delonte West and Anthony Parker were almost completely absent scoring-wise in the first half, while the team missed seven of its first eight three-point attempts overall.

Yes, He Was Dyno-Mite: With the backcourt struggling, the shots not dropping and LeBron taking his sweet time picking it up offensively, the Cavaliers needed a shot of unexpected production to keep their hopes alive in the difficult first phase of the game. They got it from J.J. Hickson. Taking advantage of L.A.'s tactic of

doubling LeBron with Pau Gasol and leaving him unattended, Hickson sprang for 11 points and 7 rebounds in the first half. The youngster didn't score in the second half, but kept hammering the glass, finishing the night with a career-high 14 rebounds. Hickson's energy and strength around the basket were absolutely vital: Cleveland may very well have been blown out by halftime if it weren't for him.

Mamba Giveth... While the Cavaliers were groping for order, Los Angeles was finding wing right out of the gate on the hot hand of Kobe Bryant. The Beanster drilled seven of his first ten from the field and racked up 16 early points as the Lake Show built a 27-16 first-quarter lead. But here, really, is where L.A. lost the game. Despite having all the momentum early, they couldn't apply the knockout punch. Cleveland stayed right in there, and while they did, Kobe's shooting, which never lessened in quantity, took a sharp dive in quality.

Like the Eiger: Cleveland's uphill climb was most slippery right at the summit. The Cavaliers drew to within one point of Los Angeles five times in the first two-and-a-half quarters and each time failed to overtake the Lake Show. Cleveland didn't take its first lead of the night until the 4:42 mark of the third quarter. Yet the Cavaliers hung in there and hung in there and hung in there.

Crowd-Killing Start, Part II: Trailing 46-44, the Cavaliers didn't exactly emerge from the halftime locker room with precision. They committed three turnovers on three possessions in falling behind by six at 50-44. Yet again, despite Cleveland's ineptitude, Los Angeles couldn't take control. And as it turned out, the Lake Show had lost their last best chance.

Moshe Dayan Couldn't Have Hit Those: Let's give it up for Anthony Parker. The 34-year old Israel Sports Legend played courageously Thursday night, stubbornly defending Kobe Bryant and finding the time to hit two very large three-point shots. The first, with 8:02 left in the third, cut the L.A. lead to 53-50 and finally got the crowd going in earnest. The second, at 4:42, put Cleveland in the lead for the first time in the game at 60-59. From there on it was a frantic, thrilling battle, a game that gave the Quicken Loans crowd and millions watching on TNT everything they

could ask for.

LeBron's Line: 37 points on 13-of-25 from the field, 1-of-9 from three-point range (!) and 10-of-13 from the line with 9 assists, 5 rebounds, 2 steals and a blocked shot. Other than his patented LeIso which bogged down Cleveland's offense late in the fourth- and which, fortunately, worked out- the man was simply stupendous. He outplayed Kobe, he took over the game in final three quarters, racking up 31 points in the last 32:00, and he abused Ron Artest, whose defensive menace against LBJ is as much a relic of the 'Oughts as the housing bubble and Creed.

The Big Prime-Timer: Shaquille O'Neal has left those 44-20 performances in his Lake Show past. But he doesn't need to be that good on the 2009-10 Cavaliers. He only needs to do what he did Thursday night. After pitching in on putting L.A. big men Gasol and Andrew Bynum in foul trouble, Shaq found his spot offensively. He struck for nine second-half points and in doing so almost single-handedly rendered the vaunted Lake Show frontcourt inert. Gasol in particular had a very poor night, shooting 5-of-14- including some gigantic misses late- and failing to mount any sort of physical challenge to O'Neal or the rest of Cleveland's big men. As the Los Angeles big men struggled with fouls and as the backcourt failed to deliver, Kobe decided to take it on himself. It didn't work.

Mamba Taketh Away... Those Kobe Bryant shots that had dropped in the first half didn't in the second. Harassed by his own physical limitations (that darned finger) as well as the aggressive Cleveland "duh-fence" (Dick Stockton lingo,) Kobe finished the night on a woeful 5-of-21 run from the field, including 1-for-5 and a cool three points in the fourth quarter- you know, the time for "the best closer in the game."

Don't Know Who the Man Is? That would, of course, be LeBron James. While his fellow MVP puppet limped down the stretch, LBJ strode with jauntiness. He put in 12 fourth-quarter points on 5-of-7 shooting, all in the last six minutes and all cash-money. Three of his jump shots turned an 80-80 tie into an 87-80

Cavalier hammerlock with 2:48 left.

Wasn't Over Yet: Los Angeles didn't win the NBA Championship last season by accident. Ron Artest triggered a game-tying 7-0 run with the 59 t h

B.S. three-pointer made against the Cavaliers in the last week, an Horryesque scoop-and-fire off a loose ball- and when Bryant found range for the only time in the period it was 87-87 with a minute-and-a-half left.

Good, Bad, Ugly: LeBron was the former: Pau was the latter two. With the score tied LBJ stuffed the Spaniard on a lay-up attempt, forced another Gasol miss, then snatched the rebound and beat the Lake Show down the floor on a roaring lay-up that broke the tie for good with 40.5 seconds left. 16 seconds later Gasol was fouled in a scramble underneath the basket and had two free throw attempts to tie the game. He missed both. It was a night of free-throw problems for Los Angeles: the Lake Show shot just 15-of-24 from the stripe.

The Boy From Brazil: Anderson Varejao had a sensational fourth period along with LeBron, scoring 7 points, grabbing four rebounds, and making the requisite hustle plays- including the one that effectively put it in the fridge for Cleveland. With 21 seconds left and the Cavaliers leading 93-87, Varejao wormed in for an offensive rebound off a LeBron free-throw miss, then calmly salted it away with a pair of free throws.

Nice Defense: After giving up 52 percent shooting in the first quarter, Cleveland pinched off the Los Angeles offense, holding the Lake Show to 60 points on 20-of-60 (33 percent) from the field. For the game L.A. shot 38.6, and after being whipped on the boards early the Cavaliers

out-rebounded the Lake Show 54-49. Cleveland also outscored Los Angeles 42-26 in the paint and, even with the injuries, broke even in bench points at 22-22.

Just One Man's Opinion: I'm no longer all that concerned about the Los Angeles Lakers. As long as the Cavaliers are at full strength or close to it they have it all over that team. There are games to be played and moves to be made, but as of chilly late January, this is Cleveland's to lose.

Next: Saturday night at 7:30, when those young bucks from Oklahoma City invade the Q. Cleveland would do well to be sharp: the Thunder are no one to sleep on.