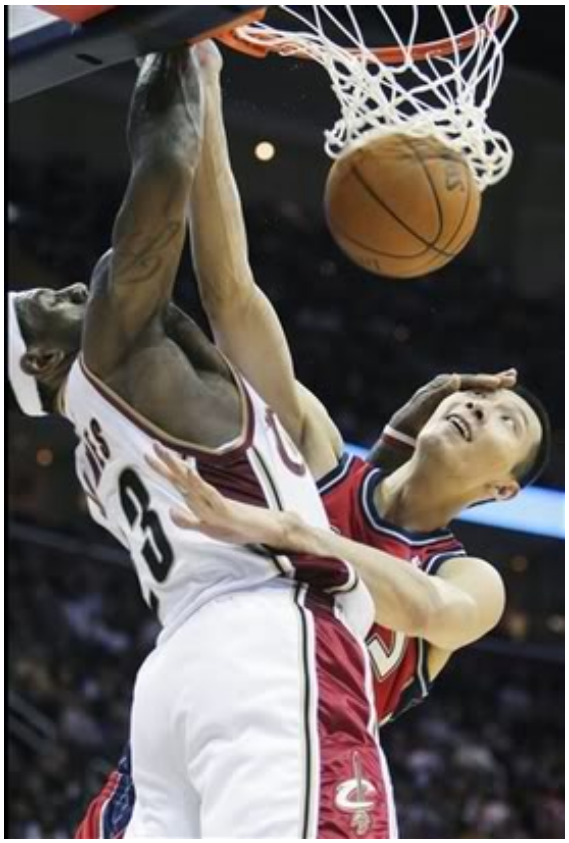

For the third time this season the Cavaliers defeated the dismal New Jersey Nets, and for the third time they didn't look particularly impressive doing it. Tuesday night's 104-97 Cleveland victory was executed in rather flat, prosaic fashion. Then again, you don't have to channel the 1996 Bulls to beat New Jersey, which left the night's proceedings with a 4-47 record and another step toward establishing a new NBA record for single-season futility.

Futility isn't a word much associated with the Cavaliers these days. Tuesday night's victory was Cleveland's twelfth in a row, good for the second longest winning streak in club history. One more game remains before the All-Star Break and it's a big one, as Orlando, a considerably more formidable opponent than the Nets, invades the Q for a nationally televised showdown on TNT Thursday night.

Early Slumber: It didn't take long for the Cavaliers to show that they left their A game somewhere in the snow outside Quicken Loans Arena. Playing lackluster defense, Cleveland spotted the visitors from Jersey a 21-13 first-quarter lead as the normally cold-shooting Nets connected on seven of their first eleven attempts from the field. The worst team in the NBA in terms of shooting percentage by a wide margin, New Jersey hit on 51.4 percent of their attempts on the night with four starters drilling more than half their shots from the field.

Sequence of the Night: Cleveland finally got it late in the first period and into the second, driving to a nine-point lead on the strength of a 27-11 run. The capper to the long surge came

on the most spectacular sequence of the game. With 5:10 remaining in the half Shaquille O'Neal stuffed Brook Lopez at the rim, dribbled to half-court and passed off to LeBron, who found Anderson Varejao for a flying, one-handed alley-oop that brought the crowd out of its seats and brought the Cavaliers to a 47-38 advantage. From there, it was Cleveland's game. The Nets hung around, drawing to within four at one point late in the third period, but they never really threatened again.

Wild at Heart: The highlight was just part of a big night for Varejao, who came off the bench to log 15 points on 6-of-7 from the field and 3-of-4 from the line with 9 rebounds and his usual array of hustle plays. Even on a night when just about everyone else was as sluggish as a bug in a steam room the Brazilian sensation flew around with abandon.

LeBron's Line: 32 points on 13-of-21 from the field, 1-of-4 from three-point range and 5-of-9 from the line with 11 assists, 3 rebounds and a steal. Once again LeBron ran the attack with aplomb, finding open shooters and picking the spots for muscular drives through the paint. His shot was off, both from the floor and from the line, but it didn't matter. Surprisingly, LeBron's -2 was the second worst plus/minus of any Cavalier who played in the game, just ahead of Daniel Gibson's -4.

Bench Bunch: The real heroes Tuesday night came off the pine, and ultimately they made the difference between a routine victory and an unthinkable defeat. Cleveland's bench accounted for 39 points and 19 rebounds while New Jersey's reserves amassed just 9 and 5. Other than Varejao, the standout performance off the bench belonged to Jawad Williams, who knocked down three triples on the way to a career-high 17 points. All four Cavalier bench performers- Varejao, Williams, Jamario Moon and Zydrunas Ilguaskas (who was otherwise miserable at 1-for-10 from the field with a technical foul) ended up on the plus side of the plus/minus ledger.

Efficiency: Despite not playing a vintage game on the whole, the Cavaliers were fairly crisp offensively, shooting 52.7 percent with an impressive 27-to-9 assist-to-turnover ratio. Cleveland's efficiency was to be expected- the Nets are the second worst team in the NBA in terms of opponents' shooting percentage- still, considering the lackluster quality of the Cavalier defense they needed every positive thing they could get on the offensive side of the ball.

Next: Thursday night at 8:00 when Orlando brings the second best record in the East to the Q for the last game before the All-Star Break.