The top two teams in the Eastern Conference got together at Quicken Loans Arena to wrap up the pre-All Star Break portion of the schedule. The last time Cleveland and Orlando met, on November 11th, Shaq got Dewey Howard in early foul trouble, Mo Williams laced in his first nine shots from the field, and the Cavaliers ran away to an easy victory in Confederated Products Arena.

But a lot has changed in the three months that have elapsed since that oh-so-cathartic butt-kicking. Orlando rolled into Thursday night's festivities playing perhaps its best ball of the season. After a woeful 2-7 stretch in January the Magicians came into Thursday winners of ten of their last twelve, including a rout of Atlanta and two conquests of Boston. For maybe the first time since this season began, Stan Van Jeremy's team is performing like the powerful unit that dispatched the Celtics and Cavaliers on the way to the 2009 Eastern Conference Championship.

Moreover, important players have reappeared in and disappeared from the respective lineups since November. Cavalier-killing sharpshooter Rashard Lewis is back in the Orlando lineup after missing the first meeting with a suspension, while Mo Williams is *hors de combat* with a shoulder injury for the eleventh consecutive game. Sure, Cleveland enjoyed that little twelve-game winning streak going into the night, but Orlando was healthier and almost as hot. Advantage Magic, right?

Wrong... although to be sure, Thursday night's game was as scary as a Cavaliers-Magic tilt can be. Orlando gobbled up an early 14-point deficit and led by as many as seven in the second half, but LeBron James put down the hammer in the fourth quarter and Cleveland won going away, 115-106. It's the thirteenth consecutive win for the Cavaliers, tying a franchise record set last season, and sends the Wine & Gold into the break with a sparkling 43-11 record and a chubby seven-game bulge over the Magicians (36-18) in the race for the top spot in the East.

So What Else Is New? Quick getaways for Cleveland against Orlando are nothing new- the Cavaliers have led the Magicians at the end of the first quarter in seven of their last ten meetings, including last season's playoff series- and once again the Wine & Gold showed the visitors from Disneyland their heels early. After spotting Orlando a 12-7 lead, the Cavaliers ripped off a 19-2 run and built a 37-23 lead at the end of twelve minutes of play.

Fine, Don't Guard Him: Other than LeBron James (10 points, 5 assists) the main catalyst for Cleveland's first-quarter surge was J.J. Hickson. Neglected by an Orlando defense that aggressively double-teamed Shaquille O'Neal, Hickson racked up 13 points in the opening period, moving beautifully without the ball and even- get this- knocking down a jump shot.

Better Than the Macarena: In the second quarter Anderson Varejao promptly picked up where Hickson had left off. The Brazilian dervish hit for 14 points in the period, utilizing his no-look lay-ups and spin-moves in the lane to befuddle Orlando defenders and looking so good doing it that TNT commentator Reggie Miller at one point was moved to compare him to Jack Sikma, the smooth-shooting center with his own immaculate coif of hair.

Power Production: Cleveland's two power forwards, Hickson and Varejao, combined for 32 first-half points on Thursday night. The unexpected bounty took the pressure off LeBron James, who struggled with his shot early (although he got it going big-time in the crunch.)

What, You Thought They Were Going Away? As we know all too well around here the Magic are capable of reducing a big deficit to kindling in an eye-blink, and that's exactly what they did in a torrid second period. Firing away at a blistering clip, Orlando scored 40 points in the quarter and although the Magicians were unable to draw ahead or even, they did reduce Cleveland's margin to three, 66-63 at halftime. As usual, the three-pointer was the main weapon in the arsenal- the Magic hit 6-of-11 from downtown in the period and eight overall in the first half. The 63 points scored by Orlando was the most allowed by the Cavaliers in the first half this season.

Thank You, Hedgehog: A major factor in Orlando's second-quarter comeback was backup point guard Jason Williams. The Artist Formerly Known as White Chocolate was on fire, hitting 4-of-4 from the field, including two three-pointers, and scoring ten points in the second stanza. Yet for some reason Williams played less than six minutes the remainder of the game, as Stan Van stuck with starting point Jameer Nelson, who committed four turnovers and shot 4-of-14, including a couple of blown lay-ups that Yours Truly could have converted.

Here We Go Again: It didn't matter that Orlando couldn't get over the hump in the first half; they got over it soon enough in the second. The Magic opened the third period with a 16-6 run to take a 79-72 lead, as Cleveland's once-crisp offense melted into a hodge-podge of wasted possessions and poor shots, many of them by Anthony Parker (who missed five from the field in this stretch.) Surprisingly, Orlando made its big push without the benefit of its best friend, the three-point shot- the Magic didn't hit a single bomb in the third period, instead opting for dribble-penetration and the mid-range styling of Rashard Lewis (19 points.)

Welcome Back, Red: Delonte West made his return to action after a ten-game absence, and he announced his presence with a big shot, a three-pointer that gave Cleveland an 82-81 lead late in the third quarter. The Cavaliers finished the period strong, outscoring Orlando 15-4 to take an 87-83 lead into the final period of action. And Brother Red wasn't done yet.

The Big Meh: The battle of Supermen past and present, Shaquille O'Neal and Dewey Howard, was for the most part a foul-plagued anti-climax. Shaq was hit with his fourth and fifth fouls in rapid succession early in the third period, while Dewey picked up his fourth in careless fashion moments later, defending LeBron on the pick-and-roll too aggressively. Neither played for the remainder of the quarter; Shaq didn't re-enter the fray until midway through the fourth.

Stuffed: Dewey won the battle of the big men statistically, with 19 points and 11 rebounds to Shaq's 10 and 6, but he couldn't get his team the win and found himself hoisted on his own blocked-shot petard, courtesy of J.J. Hickson. With 9:04 to play and the Cavaliers nursing a 94-89 lead, Dewey went in for a lay-up and was rejected emphatically by Hickson, who finished the night with 20 points, 4 rebounds and the game's most crowd-pleasing defensive play.

LeBron's Line: 32 points on 10-of-21 from the field, 2-of-6 from three-point range and 10-of-12 from the line with 13 assists, 8 rebounds and 2 steals in 45 minutes of action. The shot wasn't

there early for LBJ- he hit just three of his first eleven attempts from the field- but he got hot when it mattered, that was for sure.

The Run That Got it Done: Cleveland finally put away the Magicians with a 18-2 run that began midway through the fourth period- and not surprisingly, LeBron's fingerprints were all over it. After Dewey Howard gave Orlando a 96-94 lead on a sweeping hook with 7:31 to play, the reigning MVP went to work. He tied the game at 96 with a jumper in the face of Mickael Pietrus, found Shaq with an alley-oop to give the Cavaliers the lead for good, than roared down the lane for a driving lay-up to make it 100-96 with 3:53 remaining.

Was He Finished? Oh, hell no. Thirty seconds later LeBron fed Delonte, who knocked down a three-pointer to extend Cleveland's lead to seven at 103-96. LeBron then drilled another mid-range jumper in Pietrus's ugly mug, found Shaq for a lay-up, rattled home a three-pointer, once again in Pietrus's eye, and dropped a turnaround jumper, again on Pietrus, to make it 112-98 at the 1:12 mark of the fourth. Not even the Magic could make up *th at* deficit.

Impeccable Timing: LeBron James scored 13 points in the decisive fourth quarter Thursday night, hitting his last four shots from the field. He also handed out 4 assists in the period. After starting the night 3-of-11 from the field, LBJ hit seven of his last ten attempts.

Finally, Some Defense: After allowing Orlando to do pretty much whatever it wanted for the better part of three periods, the Cavalier defense finally locked it down when it had to. While Cleveland turned a two-point deficit into a 12-point lead, the Magicians missed nine consecutive shots and went nearly six-and-a-half minutes without a field goal. Orlando's bombardiers went a pedestrian 2-of-7 from three-point range in the second half.

And Some Nice Offense To Boot: Other than that awkward stretch early in the third period, Cleveland's offense hummed as smoothly as a late-model BMW. The Cavaliers shot a lusty 52.4 percent and put together a sparkling 28-to-5 assist-to-turnover ratio- and this against an Orlando team that went into the night tops in the league in opposing shooting percentage.

Good Coaching: After watching Orlando turn a 14-point deficit into a seven-point lead with a

54-33 run, Mike Brown switched over to a small lineup, with LeBron James playing power forward and guarding Rashard Lewis. The switch paid big dividends; while Lewis disappeared late, LeBron went crazy at the elbow and the Cavaliers took over the game. After falling behind 79-72 midway through the third period, Cleveland outscored the Magic 43-27 the rest of the way.

Fun Stat: The Cavaliers are now 6-1 against the Magic, Lake Show, Hawks and Celtics- a far cry from their dismal performance against elite teams last season.

Gotta Love the Vince: 5-of-16 from the field, 3 turnovers. The Vince Carter is the gift that keeps on giving.

Next: Thursday night at 8:00, when the Cavaliers tip off the post-All Star Break portion of the season at the Q against those rough-and-tumble Denver Nuggets.