It only seems as if Dee Brown and Kevin Gamble were running the Celtic backcourt the last time Cleveland won a game in the Hub. Actually, the last win for the Cavaliers over the Celtics in their house was January 3, 2007. Since then Cleveland had dropped nine in a row in Boston going into Thursday night's nationally televised showdown on TNT. But it's going to end at nine.

Cleveland's stunning 108-88 rout of the Celtics didn't look possible at the outset. Playing a brand of defense that can be generously described as horrid, the Cavaliers spotted Boston a 13-point first-half lead. But like a 90-pound weakling who has had sand kicked in his face by the local bully one two many times, Cleveland responded in ferocious fashion. They completely stifled the Celtics in the second half to turn a seemingly sure loss into a runaway victory, despite the loss of Shaquille O'Neal to a thumb injury. The Cavaliers have now won two in a row after their three-game post-All Star Break losing streak and are a sparkling 45-14, still in possession of the best overall record in the NBA.

And yeah, Paul Pierce didn't play for the Celtics. But so what? This was a sweet win, let's not mitigate it.

Bad Start: Thursday night's game ended as a Cavalier rout, but it certainly didn't begin that way. The Celtics knocked down 10 of their first 13 attempts from the field and sprinted to a

31-21 lead at the end of one. Particularly troublesome was Rajon Rondo, who continually broke down Cleveland's defense with ease on the way to 12 points and 6 assists in the first quarter. All told, Boston started out a blistering 17-of-23 (73.9 percent) as its lead swelled to as many as thirteen in the second period. At halftime the Celtics led 56-48 and had shot an even 60 percent from the field, including 5-of-6 from three-point range.

Same Old Same Old: Once again the culprits were two-fold: backcourt defense and transition defense. Boston's guard tandem of Rondo and Ray Allen combined for 27 first-half points. The Celtics continually beat Cleveland's laggard defenders down the floor, even after made baskets; at one point during the second period Kevin Garnett cherry-picked behind the Cavaliers for a wide-open lay-up after Cleveland had scored a basket, a play that could not have made the defense-centric Mike Brown very happy whatsoever.

The Big Injury: Shaquille O'Neal left the game midway through the second period with what was diagnosed as a "significant" right thumb sprain. There's no certainty as to how long he'll be out, although it could be a while. With the Daddy on the shelf for the foreseeable future, the return of Zydrunas Ilgauskas becomes even more of an urgent matter, although of course he won't be back until March 21st at the earliest.

Clutch Thing: Fortunately, Anderson Varejao was ready and willing to take up the slack in O'Neal's absence. Sliding down to the center spot, the Brazilian dreamboat kept Cleveland's flagging hopes alive with energetic and effective play, particularly in the critical first half. He finished the night with 14 points on 6-of-7 shooting with 10 rebounds and a variety of hustle plays, and his superb effort was a big part of the Cavaliers staying within striking distance early, when Boston was otherwise dominating the pace.

Defense Stops Resting: After being roasted inside and out in the first half the Cavaliers decided to play a little defense in the second- and lo and behold, it changed their fortunes dramatically. Trapping aggressively and contesting almost every shot, Cleveland held the Celtics to 18 third-quarter points, a defensive stand that enabled them to get back into the game. The Cavaliers used their defense as a springboard to leap within one, 74-73, at the end of the third. And their defensive effort would go from merely stalwart to downright suffocating in a dominant fourth period.

Remember This Kid? Yeah, he started at power forward for most of the first half of the season. Slack-jawed youngster, looks a little clueless at times but can jump out of the gym… that's right,

it's J.J. Hickson. Forced back into the rotation Thursday night thanks to Shaq's injury and Mike Brown's subsequent move to a small, quick rotation, J.J. took his opportunity and ran with it. In 22 energetic minutes the kid from N.C. State scored 8 points, played stout defense on Kevin Garnett and Rasheed Wallace and ran up a dizzying +27, tied for tops on the team with Delonte West. The two bench contributors combined for an alley-oop dunk, Delonte to J.J., to give the Cavaliers a 75-74 lead in the opening minute of the fourth quarter. From then on it was Cleveland's game.

Did I Mention I Have a Man-Crush? The line for Delonte West, my all-time favorite Cavalier (with apologies to the late Bobby Phills): 32 minutes, 7 points, 5 assists,
8
rebounds and a +27.

We Got Your Back: With LeBron out of the game, the Cavaliers outscored Boston 11-4 to take an 84-78 lead with 7:49 remaining in the game. The bench as a whole was outstanding Thursday night, scoring 33 points and adding tenacious defense on the part of Delonte, J.J., Andy and Jamario. Their contributions were vital to the victory- including those of Jamario Moon, who didn't score but played nice defense off the pine.

Small Only in a Manner of Speaking: With Shaq hors de combat, Mike Brown was forced to go with his small lineup, with Varejao and Hickson in the frontcourt- and the results were devastating. Boston's old, slow team simply didn't have the answers for Cleveland's quickness and agility, and the pick-and-roll plays with which the Celtics had abused the Cavaliers in the first half dried up almost completely. Once again this team shows its versatility; it can go big against the likes of the Magic and Lake Show and small on nights like these and not lose a step. When everyone is healthy, there isn't a team in this league the Cavaliers can't match up with.

LeBron's Line: 36 points on 11-of-23 from the field, 3-of-6 from three-point range and 11-of-15 from the line with 9 assists and 7 rebounds in 36 minutes. LeBron's 21 first-half points helped keep Cleveland in the game early and his overall floor game helped put it away late. Those 36 minutes played were the best part of his line; with Paul Pierce on the shelf for Boston and the supporting cast stepping up, LeBron didn't have to log gargantuan time for his team to win.

Welcome Back, Mo: To say the least, Mo Williams has struggled since returning from his shoulder injury, and it looked like the same old same old early on Thursday night. Not only was Mo ice-cold from outside, he was also a veritable turnstile defensively, watching helplessly as

Rondo blew by him again and again while Boston built its early lead. And in the fourth quarter, with Cleveland's team defense stifling the Celtics, Mo finally found the range that had eluded him since he came back. He ripped cord on three consecutive three-point baskets, one after the other after the other, to expand the Cavalier lead to 93-83 with 5:29 to play. 12 of Mo's 19 points came in the fourth period. The Mississippi marksman has had his ups and downs of late, and he'll surely have more down the stretch- but he stepped up in a major way on Thursday night.

Welcome Back, Leon: Tough, resilient Leon Powe made his Cavalier debut in his old stomping grounds and chipped in with four late points. He might not contribute much this season- he looked rusty and winded in his brief excursion- but not many players have overcome, and continue to overcome, the odds like Leon Powe has. It was good to see him in a Cavaliers uniform doing his thing.

Nice Stat: After spotting Boston a 42-29 lead with 8:36 to play in the second period, the Cavaliers outscored the Celtics 79-46 the rest of the way.

Nice Stat II: After shooting 60 percent (24-of-40) in the first half, the Celtics shot 9-of-41 (21.9 percent) in the second. That's right: Boston had a total of nine field goals in the last 24 minutes.

Nice Stat III: In the final twelve minutes of play the Celtics shot 3-of-20 and committed five turnovers.

Diminishing Returns: Boston's point total by quarter: 31, 25, 18, 14.

Next: Friday night at 7:00, when the Cavaliers invade Canada to take on the Toronto Raptors.