Z's baaaaaack

The home debut of former (I'm not sure what to call him, officially) Cavalier Zydrunas Ilgauskas was the big story at The Q, as fans were given plenty of Z paraphernalia and delivered several rousing ovations for the recently traded/released/re-signed center. It was really nice to see. When Ilgauskas was acknowledged after the starting five was introduced, it was tough not to get a little choked up.

The return of Z ties up some loose ends for the organization, and I'm sure it means a lot to Ilgauskas, too. If this team ultimately does win a title, not having Z wouldn't have subtracted anything from the glory, but having Z would definitely make things sweeter. Plus, it's not like Z is just here for sentimental reasons; he will give the Cavs some quality minutes in the playoffs, and his size mixed with Shaq's will really help the Cavs match up with the Magic and (hopefully) the Lakers.

Catch the 8:15 Into the City

I was treated to a little BTO on the way to the gym today, which was appropriate because it was another “Takin’ Care of Business” game for the Cavs. I talked about the Cavs “playing down” to their opponents last week, and the fact that it’s simply the nature of the NBA that you can’t blow out every lousy team. The NBA schedule is definitely too long, especially if a team makes a deep run into the playoffs, and that makes it tough to be “on” every night.

Relate what these guys to do any job, whether that’s heading to an office, factory, classroom, or wherever. Anything that you are obligated to do on a daily basis can get a little monotonous – it’s just human nature - and you’re going to have good days and bad days. Yes, playing basketball is a game, and is pretty fun (and these guys make a little more money than you and I), but if it were all that I did, every day for seven to nine months a year, once in a while I might “only” beat the Kings by seven, too.

The game was never really in doubt, anyway. From about midway through the second quarter, it was clear that the Kings were going to hang around, but you expected the Cavs to put their collective foot on the gas in the third or fourth quarter and put them away. That’s exactly what happened, as the Cavs clamped down defensively in the fourth quarter and finished off Sacramento. Sure, they played down to their level, but consider that as recently as two seasons ago the Cavs blew games like this one on a regular basis. As a team they’ve come a long way, and now they understand how to pace themselves through a grueling season and also win the games that they absolutely should win.

No Tyreke

I haven’t been able to see much of the Kings this year, so purely from the perspective of a basketball fan, I was a little disappointed to see the prohibitive favorite for the Rookie of the Year Award, Tyreke Evans, on the shelf and still suffering from the effects of a concussion. In addition to the concussion, apparently Evans suffered lacerated gums and some chipped teeth. I’m not entirely sure what lacerated gums entail, nor do I have any desire to find out.

At any rate, Evans has made quite an impression during his rookie campaign, averaging 20.3 points, 5.2 rebounds, and 5.6 assists per game. Those numbers are eerily similar to another King, who posted 20.9-5.5-5.9 as a rookie. Consider that King James of Akron only shot 41.7% in his first season, while Evans has shot 46.1%, and you can see what a great debut season

this has been for the former Memphis Tiger. Evans is a little smaller than James and doesn't quite have his physical gifts (then again, who does?), but it's easy to see why his emergence made the Kings so comfortable with unloading Kevin Martin at the deadline. Count me among those watching Evans' next couple of seasons with great interest.

Varejao still sidelined

Some of the Cavs' collective sluggishness might be chalked up to Anderson Varejao's absence. Varejao tweaked his left hamstring against the Spurs on Friday night, and with very little chance of the Cavs losing their leads over the Lakers and Magic, Mike Brown has the luxury of giving players extra rest if necessary.

The Cavs definitely look a little different without Varejao's energy on the floor, which tends to rub off on his teammates. Plus/minus is one of those stats that doesn't do a whole lot for me, but when it comes to Varejao, his high +/- rating is probably more reflective of his value to the team than his traditional statistics. As opposed to simple points and rebounds, Varejao's +/- rating does a better job capturing all of the different ways that his various hustle plays create extra possessions for the Cavs.

As the rotation turns…

Although Mike Brown won the Coach of the Year Award last year, there are still some media members who have been very critical of him (read: Simmons, William). And yes, COTY tends to reward those who coach good teams, but how many teams have won 60-plus games in consecutive seasons with awful coaches? This discussion can devolve in a "chicken or the egg" debate pretty quickly, but count me among those who think that Brown probably doesn't get enough credit.

Consider all of the different rosters that Mike Brown has had to deal with as the result of free agent pickups, trades, Delonte's off-the-court issues, and injuries. When healthy, the Cavs are pretty loaded, and while that depth has helped them survive various injuries, it shouldn't subtract from the job that Brown has done this year. Coach Brown's Cavs are about to win 60 games for the second straight season, and in the next couple of weeks they should clinch the league's best record. That's nothing to thumb your nose at, and although Brown definitely has

his shortcomings, he's doing a lot more right than wrong.

But getting back to the rotation - Varejao's injury, although it doesn't seem to be serious or long-term, has forced Brown to give more minutes to Leon Powe and J.J. Hickson. It seems that Brown is trying to reign in the rotation and get it down to eight or nine guys playing heavy minutes every night, which makes sense. Only eight Cavs played this afternoon against the Kings: the starting five (Mo, Parker, LBJ, Jamison, and Hickson), plus Ilgauskas, Powe, and Delonte West.

With Delonte West apparently 100%, we've seen Brown use him as the lone guard off the bench. That probably makes sense considering how much LeBron James handles the ball. The odd man out has been Daniel Gibson, who really helped the Cavs through the stretch when Mo and Delonte were hurt.

We should see a similar scenario play out when Varejao and Shaq return for the playoffs. It seems like Mike Brown is content to bring Zydrunas Ilgauskas off the bench, which makes sense considering that he'll be coming off the bench when Shaq returns in the near future. A healthy front court will probably mean that Hickson and Powe will both see their minutes cut, and one will probably hardly see any floor time. The odd man out will likely be Hickson, because if Powe continues to progress, he's the more consistent player and has already proven himself in the playoffs. But if Hickson continues to perform at a high level, it's going to make Mike Brown's choice much more difficult.

Regarding Hickson

Don't look now, but J.J. Hickson has played four excellent games in a row. In the previous three, Hickson scored 13, 20, and 20, respectively, along with 10 points and 5 boards against the Kings on 5-of-8 shooting. He has also averaged 7.5 rebounds during that 4-game stretch.

Much of Hickson's improvement has come from his increased court awareness and ability to move without the ball. When it comes to moving without the ball, Hickson can learn from Varejao, who is one of the best in the league. We have also seen his mid-range jumper start to improve, which would be a huge addition to Hickson's game if he could hit it consistently.

The big thing I'll look for next season, in addition to just an all-around defensive improvement, is for Hickson to get better with his back to the basket. If he can develop some consistent post moves instead of just relying on his freakish athleticism to score, he has the potential to be (gulp) an All-Star forward a few years down the road. The fact that Danny Ferry didn't have to give him up in the Jamison deal is downright criminal.

The Natural

There are some people that you can envision doing one thing, and one thing only. Delonte West is one such person. The guy was simply born to play basketball, and he has terrific instincts for the game and an incredibly high basketball IQ. West had two great plays that won't show up in the box score, as he fouled two Kings to prevent open dunks and put them on the line. Two very sound, smart decisions that we don't see enough of in the league these days, and two great examples of what makes Delonte such a valuable player. In many ways, he's the Anderson Varejao of the Cavs' guards. Delonte is going to be an important part of the playoff rotation, and he seems to have his personal issues sorted out. Here's hoping he can keep it up.

DiGiorno Pizza® Austin Carr Quote of the Game

"He (Donte Greene) was like a bull in a China closet."

The mixed metaphors, the hyperbole, the nicknames, the ridiculous made up stats – in the words of Jerry Seinfeld's mom, "How can anyone not like him?"

Up next: 3/31, Milwaukee Bucks, 7:00, FSN Ohio