**Three up, three down**

LeBron James sat out his third straight game this afternoon, and for the third straight game the Cavs came up a little short. Everyone played except James, Anthony Parker, and the injured Shaquille O'Neal, who looked awfully dapper on the bench in a suit and tie. In a sideline interview, LeBron mentioned that Shaq has lost about 20 pounds since he injured his thumb in February. He was wearing a suit, but you could tell that The Diesel definitely looked slimmer.

The Magic looked like they were caught off guard that the LeBron-less Cavs would still attempt to play basketball without their superstar, because the Cavs were able to build a substantial lead in the first half. That lead was as high as 16 points in the second quarter, although the Magic whittled it down to 4 by halftime. While the Cavs were fighting admirably, it was clear that they were going to have a difficult time fending off the Magic for 48 minutes.

With solid scoring games from Antawn Jamison, Delonte West, and Mo Williams, the Cavs fought valiantly and were in a position to pull off the upset late in the fourth quarter. Ultimately, the Magic's hot shooting in the second half was too much for the Cavs, as a few big Mickael Pietrus jumpers really hurt. In spite of the loss, it's a pretty fair assumption that the Cavs would have won this game with LeBron on the floor, and that's something of a moral victory in a game that was meaningless for the Cavaliers.

These losses aren't anything to sweat about – Mike Brown just wants to ensure that LeBron's batteries are fully charged for the playoffs, and he'd like to avoid any kind of freak injury to James, too.

**Jamison at full strength**

Speaking of freak injuries, it sure looked like Antawn Jamison had suffered one when Luol Deng stepped on his foot during Thursday night's game in Chicago. It looked really bad, and I'm sure I wasn't the only one who assumed the worst. After seeing the replay, it wouldn't have surprised me to see Jamison out of commission until 2010-2011, but apparently his foot has a clean bill of health. Jamison mentioned that it isn't bruised or even sore.

I was even a little surprised to see Jamison back in the lineup and looking like his normal, consistent self after just one game off. Hopefully the Cavs got their injury scare out of their collective system. It is a little amazing that considering all of the injuries this team has endured throughout the season, it looks like there's a great chance that everyone will be healthy for the playoffs. Knock on wood.

**"Superman"**

For as much praise as Dwight Howard receives, shouldn't there be more focus on the fact that he could be so much better? Consider his stats over the last four seasons, when Howard's Magic teams have made the playoffs.

| | **PTS** | **REB** | **BLK** | **FG%** | **FT%** | **TO** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2006-07** | 17.6 | 12.3 | 1.9 | 60.3 | 58.6 | 3.9 |
| **2007-08** | 20.7 | 14.2 | 2.2 | 59.9 | 59.0 | 3.2 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2008-09** | 20.6 | 13.8 | 2.9 | 57.2 | 59.4 |
| 3.0 | | | | | |
| **2009-10** | 18.4 | 13.2 | 2.8 | 60.8 | 59.6 |
| 3.4 | | | | | |

Now, Howard has played about a minute less each game than he did last season, but at least from a statistical perspective, there's not much growth there. The only significant improvements are in blocks and a slight reduction in turnovers. Howard isn't a rookie anymore. Those numbers are from seasons three through six of his career, and if he's not making any quantum leaps now, maybe he simply is what he is.

Dwight Howard is the best all-around center in the NBA, but is it unreasonable to imagine this guy averaging 30 points, 15 boards, and 4 or 5 blocks per game? Howard is so physically superior to every other center that nobody can outmuscle him, and he's still freakishly athletic and quick. Take a digital image of LeBron James, then imagine that you pulled on the corner of that photo with your mouse to make it larger; you'd be left with Dwight Howard.

Can you imagine if Howard had any kind of a consistent jumper? What if his jumper was 50% as good as Kevin Garnett's? What if he could just hit an eight-footer consistently? The bottom line is that in his sixth season, we still haven't seen any consistent finesse game develop for Howard; his offense is still just about out-beasting everyone else underneath.

To be fair, that's something he can accomplish more often than not. However, as Cavs fans we have seen what the development of an average to above-average (depending on who you talk to) jumper has done for LeBron James, so just imagine what a decent short jumper, or hook shot could do for Dwight.

The problem might lie a little deeper for Howard, and it might be tied to his attitude. He seems like a friendly guy, but I don't see him out there every night with fire in his belly, ready to go around, over or through an opponent to beat him, and that's what leaders of great teams do. Jordan did it, Kobe is still doing it, Kevin Garnett still has that look (even if his body won't cooperate), and LeBron James is just about there, too. Howard, on the other hand, doesn't seem to leave everything on the floor each night, and it's why he hasn't become one of the

NBA's great leaders or truly elite players, and he doesn't seem to be headed in that direction.

Howard couldn't even come up with his own nickname – he had to steal it. Even more embarrassing, Howard swiped his nickname from former Magic center Shaquille O'Neal, who famously tattooed his arm with the Superman emblem.

Howard wants to be Superman, but he doesn't have the mental makeup. Howard is a muscular Robin who wears a Superman cape.

**Living and dying with threes**

When the Cavs got out to a big lead in the first half, one of the reasons was that the Magic started the game ice cold from downtown. It shouldn't come as a shock that when the Magic finished off their second half comeback, their three point accuracy had returned.

The Cavs blew some big leads against the Magic in the Eastern Finals last year, too. Again, it was because of Orlando's streaky three-point shooting. One year later, we as fans have to hope that the Cavs have learned how to deal with the Magic's Jekyll/Hyde jump shooting. Hopefully they have learned that the Magic are committed to the three, whether they're falling or not.

The Cavs can't afford to rest on their laurels or to be baited into shooting lots of jumpers if they build a lead, because the Magic can shoot themselves back into a game just as easily as they can shoot themselves out of one. The Cavs have to play with consistency through the Magic's peaks and valleys.

**Limited minutes**

One of the "problems" Mike Brown has had all season, and especially since the Jamison trade, has been finding enough minutes to go around on one of the NBA's deepest rosters. Giving

some starters rest down the stretch has given Brown a chance to play those who drew the short straws earlier this season. Brown actually played all 12 active players against the Magic this afternoon.

In addition to simply getting some playing time, this is an opportunity to players to make a closing argument of sorts to Brown as to why they should be given playoff minutes. Even so, I suspect Brown probably has his mind made up already.

The starting five, if healthy, will obviously be Williams, Parker, James, Jamison, and O'Neal. Delonte West and Anderson Varejao will be the first two players off the bench. Zydrunas Ilgauskas will see his share of meaningful minutes, especially if the Cavs square off with the Magic or the Lakers. I also expect Jawad Williams and Jamario Moon to see a decent amount of minutes because of their defensive skills and their abilities to play multiple positions.

Daniel Gibson probably won't see many regular minutes unless Mo Williams really struggles, but he'll still be used in select shooting situations. Sebastian Telfair and Danny Green might not ever be active.

The most interesting development will be to see how minutes are divided between Leon Powe, J.J. Hickson, and to a lesser degree, Zydrunas Ilgauskas. Brown may defer to Powe in many situations due to his playoff experience, but don't be surprised to see Hickson have one or two games when he comes in, gets hot, and provides some key bench support. Ilgauskas' minutes will be determined by match ups, whether or not he can find his jumper, and the success of Hickson and Powe.

**Ilgauskas' jumper**

Zydrunas Ilgauskas came back to Cleveland, but his jump shot has yet to follow him. While Z has been effective around the hoop, he hasn't looked totally comfortable with his jump shot yet. Sometimes Ilgauskas looks like he's rushing things, and sometimes he seems like he's a step too close or, as is more often the case, a step too far out.

Ilgauskas' silky smooth jumper is one of the things that made him such a great, if unlikely fit, with LeBron James. If he isn't hitting it consistently he obviously loses much of his value to the

Cavs, and as I mentioned earlier, if that jumper isn't falling Ilgauskas could become more of a situational player than a consistent rotation player come the playoffs.

**LeBron's posse dropping hints?**

This year is as much (and in my opinion, much more) about keeping LeBron as it is about winning a championship. Those goals obviously aren't mutually exclusive, and it appears that LeBron may be starting to allude to his inner circle that he's not going anywhere, as you can read in this excellent piece by Brian Windhorst .

According to Windhorst, a source said, "I have never been so sure that [LeBron is] going to stay in Cleveland than I am right now." Did anyone else just hear the collective blood pressure of Northeast Ohio and Cleveland fans everywhere drop several points? There is still plenty of time for new developments, and as Windhorst astutely points out, the way a season ends usually has a big effect on what players decide to do in free agency, but this news is nothing but positive.

One of the most interesting things that Windhorst's article reveals is that the Cavs holding LeBron's Bird Rights doesn't allow them to pay him significantly more than other clubs if LeBron keeps signing short deals like the three-year contract he signed back in 2006. If James signs a similar deal the Cavs can only pay him roughly $400,000 more per season than another team. I say "only" as if any of us will bank even close to that number this year, but in the context of LeBron James, that's not a ton of cash.

Still, this story is another positive development towards that ultimate goal of keeping LeBron wearing Wine and Gold for the foreseeable future. Couple this news with the fact that LeBron's new contract with Nike doesn't contain any kind of "relocation bonuses," the fact that the Cavs have locked up the NBA's best record for the second straight season, and the fact that LeBron's supporting cast is better than it's ever been, and we should feel pretty good about the job that Dan Gilbert and Danny Ferry have done to keep LeBron from heading to a larger market. The playoffs start this week, but the off-season could prove to be just as interesting.

**Up next: 4/14, at Atlanta Hawks, 8:00, FSN Ohio**