Well, the Cavaliers responded to Hnat's column yesterday about only recieving production from a small group of players. Z, Varejao, Sasha, and even Damon Jones showed up big time last night as the Cavs routed the Bulls on TNT. In Hnat's recap, he also brings up a good point - Drew Gooden could be headed for an All-Star appearance.

THE SUMMARY:

Maybe the Cavs would go 82-0 if the schedule maker could feed them a diet of nothing but playoff teams. Coming off two disappointing efforts to the Bobcats and Hawks, the Cavs tore apart the Chicago Bulls, 113-94. Five Cavs players scored in double figures, with Drew Gooden leading the charge with 20 points. Anderson Varejao set a new career high with 15 points. The Cavs had 38 assists (LeBron leading the way with 12), shot 57% from the field, clobbered the Bulls on the boards 47-30 … yeah, they basically dominated the Bulls in every way possible. Kirk Hinrich, who is always a tough little SOB against the Cavs (although I suppose that's true for 30 other NBA teams too), led Chicago with 20 points and 11 assists.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE GAME:

How sweet it is. There are so many things I liked about the Cavs' performance in this one, I do not know where to begin.

1. In my column yesterday , I said that the Cavs were getting contributions from exactly four players: LeBron, Gooden, Donyell Marshall, and Larry Hughes. Last night, four more players showed up.

Zydrunas Ilgauskas had basically the same numbers that he has had all season – 8 points and 9 rebounds – but he looked much more active and effective. Give him credit for being a defensive presence in the middle early on – he blocked one shot and altered several others as the Cavs grabbed a 12 point lead by the end of the first quarter.

I am a big believer in tilting the system to your players' strengths, as opposed to trying to force round-peg players into square holes. I think a large part of the problem with Z thus far this season is that he is being asked to do things that he has not had to do before, and it is not yet in his comfort zone. It was great to see LeBron and Z work a couple of their pick-and-fade plays; Z from 15-18 feet is like anybody else shooting a layup.

Anderson Varejao showed up big time, with his 15 points, 7 boards, and relentless hustle in 22 minutes. This is the guy who was a key contributor down the stretch last year. He even drained a couple of jumpers from 18 feet. Andy, it's great to see you again.

Earlier this week, Coach Mike Brown was quoted as saying that Sasha Pavlovic and Shannon Brown would likely see more playing time because of the disappointing play of Damon Jones and David Wesley. Well, Sasha may have just kicked both of those guys down a notch in the rotation, at least for a couple of weeks. Sasha showed the range of his game, from power dunks to swishing three pointers, on his way to 16 points.

My concern is that this is the Sasha that we see maybe three or four games per year – the one that looks like a star in embryo – and in the past, he has always crashed back to earth by the next game. I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt for now. He has earned more playing time, and deserves to be one of the first reserves off the bench, particularly in the backcourt.

Finally, Damon Jones came to play as well. He had his requisite three point bombing raids, but also hit a couple of intermediate range shots.

2. Drew Gooden, All-Star. Don't laugh. He's on his way. The 20 points and 9 rebounds that show up next to his name in the box score do not capture what a force he was. The Cavs got off to a slow start, and in those few minutes, Gooden was the only good thing they had going. He scored 8 of the team's first 12 points and also pulled down several rebounds in the opening frame.

One thought: is the much-maligned new ball actually helping Drew? He has not been fumbling the ball nearly as often as in previous seasons. A play from the third quarter was particularly illustrative. LeBron pulled up for a long jumper. In mid-air, he spotted Gooden

under the basket, and turned his shot into a pass. From two years of watching Drew, we know that this play would usually have one of two results:

(a) Gooden would not be looking for the pass, and the ball would clang off his head and out of bounds;

(b) Gooden would be looking for the pass, but the ball would hit him in the hands, then trickle out of bounds.

Not last night, though. Gooden grabbed the pass and slammed home an authoritative dunk.

3. The Cavs completely took Chicago's Ben Wallace out of the game. I don't understand why Wallace has been such a ballyhooed signing; he's on the back side of his career, he has no offensive game, and he added to Chicago's major strength, while still leaving all of their weaknesses very much exposed. Anyway, Wallace was a non-factor, with only 2 points (from the free throw line!) and 5 rebounds.

4. Speaking of free throws, the Cavs hit theirs for a change, going 15 of 18 from the stripe. We cannot underestimate how much that helps the flow of the game. Late in the third quarter, Chicago briefly cut the Cavs' lead (which was in double digits for most of the game) to 9 points. Had the Cavs not been hitting their free throws, that lead would have been more like 4 or 5 points. And then the wheels would have been coming off. The general mood would have been “here we go again”, and the Bulls may have capitalized on that to get the win. The game is much, much easier when you hit those freebies.

5. As mentioned earlier, the Cavs had 38 assists. When basketball is played the right way, it is art. The court is the canvas; the ball, the brush. The Cavs were a team of Rembrandts last night, moving the ball around and rarely lapsing into the “five guys standing on a street corner” offensive set. (It certainly helps when you shoot 57% from the floor; but good passes have much to do with getting that percentage that high.)

WHAT I DIDN’T LIKE ABOUT THE GAME:

1. Lest we get too excited, the Three Amigos of Eric Snow, David Wesley, and Jones still combined for 10 points in 52 total minutes played. That's better than they had been doing all season, d they did add 8 assists and a few rebounds. I can't criticize the effort too much, but do want to point out that their combined best line of the year still represents barely passable performance on an elite level team. This is not the 2002 Cavaliers (“starting at point guard, Darius Miles!”) any more.

2. Shannon Brown. I've been calling for him to get some playing time. He got five minutes of garbage time at the end of the game, and did next to nothing to help his cause. His dribble made him a walking turnover (I had flashbacks to John “Salt” Morton) and his shot looked

terrible (he threw one air ball from five feet that Varejao caught and dropped in the hole; through the wonders of a generous official scorer, Brown got the assist). I think he may have just been nervous. In the last minute of the game, he did show a nice baseline move on a layup.

3. I can't quibble too much with the decision to play Marshall and Varejao, as both of them had strong games off the bench. But I do wish that Gooden would have gotten some more playing time. After playing nine terrific minutes in the first quarter, he sat on the bench for most of the rest of the half.

4. We Want Scot Pollard!

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

The 1-3 Boston Celtics come to town on Saturday night. The Celtics feature two of the league's top scorers in Paul Pierce (as usual) and Wally Szczerbiak (bit of a surprise there). Will the Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde version of the Cavs show up?