

Are the Cleveland Cavaliers doing better or worse since temporarily losing guard Kyrie Irving to a finger

Written by Kathy

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By Karl Kimbrough, Cleveland Urban News.Com Sportswriter

CLEVELAND,Ohio-Are the Cavaliers getting better or worst as an NBA basketball team serving the major metropolitan city of Cleveland since temporarily losing Kyrie Irving (pictured) to an injury last month? Is Irving's replacement, Jeremy Pargo (pictured), effectively stepping up to the plate?

Before Kyrie Irving's finger fracture that sideline the point guard who was drafted by Cleveland as a first all around pick in 2011, a year after LeBron James left the team and joined The Miami Heat, the Cavs had won two games and lost eight.Since then, in eight games, they are two and six. After Kyrie's injury most observers probably looked at the Cavs as a definite high lottery team this year and thought they would be almost unteachable.

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Let's face it, entering this season Irving was the only star quality player on the team. So if anyone on the roster thought they deserved more attention this was their opportunity. He has done so much for the team offensively, creating his own shot and facilitating for others. Even more, Irving would be the go to player in crunch time, at the end of games. What would they do without him?

Coach Byron Scott decided to insert little used Jeremy Pargo at Irving's position. Pargo was acquired in a trade this summer and had only appeared in two games this season before starting in place of the injured Irving.

When asked why he chose Pargo, Scott told reporters that he chose him because in comparison to other considered "he plays better defense."

In his first start, which came against the Philadelphia 76ers, Pargo surprised everyone with his offense. He not only ran the team fluidly, but jumped out of anonymity with 28 points. His performance was just what this rudderless team needed. They went on to beat the Philadelphia 76ers 92 to 83.

A statistic that has been a major point of emphasis is to not allow opponents to shoot close to 50 percent. The

Cavaliers held Philadelphia to just 36 percent in that game. But the real test that would tell us how the Cavaliers would respond in Irving's absence and whether they have what it takes to compete and win games would come in the next three games after the ton the road.

The first game would come against the Orlando Magic. As the game began the Cavs jumped out and took control early, forcing the Magic into 16 first half turnovers and taking a 51 to 45 lead at the half. They allowed the Magic to shoot 50 percent from the floor for the game. Even more important, the Cavaliers allowed the Magic to execute their offense during the latter part of the game. For example, with 36 seconds left in the game and the Magic leading 98 to 97, Orlando ran a screen and roll at the three point line, Tyler Zeller lost the screener, allowing him to roll to the basket for an easy uncontested lay up.

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This was just one example of how the Cavaliers would execute their defensive principles properly in the second half of the game and why they have averaged over 50 percent in defensive field goal percentage all season.

In this game against the Magic, Dion Waiters had 25 points and five assists. Pargo followed his 28 point performance with 15 points. Anderson Varejao continued his outstanding play with 19 points and 17 rebounds.

Anderson has taken on more of a leadership roll with Irving out. Unfortunately, his teammates did not play intense, gritty, and smart like he did on this night, because that was the difference in the second half. The next night in Miami the Cavaliers would face the world champion Miami Heat. This would seem to be a game where the Cavaliers would be over matched from the beginning, but they had the lead with just 2 minutes left. How did the Cavaliers have the lead against the world champs on their home court this far into the game?

They played very well offensively, shooting 44 percent from the floor. Seven players scored in double figures for the Cavs and the team shot 45 percent from the three point line, 14 out of 31.

The Cavs' Omri Casspi made a surprising four out of four. C.J. Miles scored 10 points Boobie Gibson had 11 points and the bench scored 41 points. This is the bench that fans feared watching enter the game prior to Kyrie's injury and had averaged just 20 points as a unit. Pargo had 16 points and has averaged 17 points per game as a starter for eight games. The Cavaliers also had offensive rebounds against the Heat.

Unfortunately for the Cavaliers even though they shot the ball well for most of that game, they allowed the Heat to shoot 52 percent from the field and did not score in the last two minutes. In addition, after having a 108 to 101 lead with 1.58 seconds left, the Cavaliers poor execution on defense came up and bit them in the backside again. With the score 108 to 103 and 1:21 seconds left in the game Dion Waiters got caught watching Mario Chalmers, who had the ball dribbling in place. The key here is that Chalmers was being defended by Gibson on the perimeter and was not his concern. Waiters was a good three strides away from his man, Ray Allen.

Allen was standing at the three point line and Chalmers saw him open and passed him the ball.

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By the time Waiters made an effort to recover Allen was on his way to the basket for a lay up and was fouled, and converted a three point play.

Again with 20 seconds left, Waiter took two steps towards LeBron James, who was already double teamed and he left Allen, the all time NBA leader in three pointers. wide open. Needless to say LeBron saw Allen, passed him the ball, and Allen made the game winning shot, wide open.

This is how the Cavaliers have lost all of their close games since Irving has been out. They have had poor defensive and offensive execution late in close games. Along with Orlando and Miami, the Cavaliers have lost to Memphis who have the best record in the league and Portland, by six points or less.

The Cavaliers have been able to contend with these teams for most of games despite allowing a high shooting percentage because of their rebounding. They are first in the league in not allowing offensive rebounds.

Of course most people will say they would have won those games with Kyrie. That certainly maybe true, but with or without Kyrie the team has had the issue of not stopping teams down the

stretch and are still giving up close to 50 percent shooting in almost every game. This has to change if the Cavaliers are going to start winning more often. Varegao agrees.

When asked about this problem he told reporters that "we have to find away to win those games, because we are playing as good as them for the whole game, then the last two or three minutes is where we are losing the games." But have the Cavaliers gotten better since Kyrie has been out of the line up, yes they have. They are better because their bench players like Pargo, Casspi and Zeller have stepped up and Varejao has improved his all star play.

Coach Scott agrees as well.

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"I feel we're doing a lot of good things right now, we're getting better on both ends of the floor as we have been talking about for a week or so, we just have those lapses that most veteran teams don't have," said Scott.

The NBA schedule maker has loaded the Cavaliers up with 11 back to back games over the first two months. After the first two months are over they won't have more than three back to backs in any month this season. Hopefully that is when the young Cavs will have time to allow what they have learned to take effect. But they can't wait until the schedule is favorable to improve their defense and offensive execution or they will be out of the playoff race before the month is over.

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