

LeBron scores 61 in win over Bobcats

Written by Administrator
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MIAMI (AP) — An hour after what he called the best regular-season game he's ever played, LeBron James simply explained why this performance was like none other.

The basketball, he said, felt small as a golf ball.

The basket, to him, looked as wide as the ocean.

Best player in the game. Best game of his career. James rewrote his record book Monday night, etched his name a few different times in Miami Heat annals as well, and let the NBA know in crystal-clear terms that his MVP award won't be ceded without a fight this season. He scored 61 points, setting career- and franchise-bests, as the Heat topped the Charlotte Bobcats 124-107.

"A surreal feeling for me right now," James said.

With good reason. He made 22 of his 33 field-goal tries, becoming just the third player in the past 25 years to take that many shots and make at least two-thirds of them, with only Alex English and Shaquille O'Neal on that list. James set a career-high for field goals made, plus Heat records for points in a quarter (25) and a half (37).

And of all his feats on Monday, the most impressive might have been how he started 8 for 8 from 3-point range.

"The man above has given me some unbelievable abilities to play the game of basketball," James said before the Heat flew to Houston for a game there Tuesday. "I just try to take advantage of it every night. I got the trust of my teammates and my coaching staff to go in there and let it go."

Glen Rice scored 56 to set the Heat record on April 15, 1995, against Orlando. James' previous

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career best had been 56 points, on March 20, 2005, for Cleveland against Toronto.

This outing was much better, James said. Not because 61 tops 56 — but because the night he scored 56, his Cavaliers lost.

"Phenomenal, amazing, stupendous ... he reminds me of me," Heat forward Chris Bosh said afterward in an overjoyed locker room.

James had 24 points at halftime, then added 25 in the third quarter. The record-breaker came with 5:46 left, when James spun through and around three defenders for a layup that fell as he tumbled to the court.

Heat coach Erik Spoelstra walked into his postgame news conference with a confession: He nearly took James out after the third quarter.

He didn't. Good call.

"He was in a great groove, obviously," Spoelstra said.

Here's how good James was on this night: Al Jefferson finished with 38 points and 19 rebounds for the Bobcats, making him just the fourth player in the past six seasons to put up a stat line like that.

No one noticed.

"You take away his 61 points," Jefferson said, "and we still had a fighting chance there at the end."

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Yes, even the Bobcats were marveling at James. He was hitting from everywhere, even a 3-pointer from about 30 feet — Spoelstra joked it was from 40 — late in the third quarter, as the crowd roared and the Heat bench jumped with joy.

"Yeah, that was a designed play," Spoelstra deadpanned. "We've been working on that one for a while."

That was the moment, James said, when he knew he was in the midst of a special night.

"I felt pretty good in the first half but halftime can always kind of derail things and slow things up," James said. "But I was able to get things going once again in the third quarter and I knew it could be one of those nights."

Not "one of those nights."

Even for James, this was like no other.

"Once he sniffed 60, we knew he was going for it," Heat forward Shane Battier said. "And the amazing part is the efficiency. Good Lord. Sixty-one on 33 shots, that's Wilt Chamberlain-esque. That's pretty amazing. Incredible performance."

When James checked out with 1:24 left, the entire Heat roster met him near midcourt for high-fives and hugs, and the sellout crowd gave him a standing ovation. A second huge roar followed when he waved to the crowd, as "M-V-P" chants rained down.

"If he's going to shoot the ball like that from that range, there's nobody that's going to beat them," Bobcats coach Steve Clifford said.

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Miami was without guard Dwyane Wade, who got a night off to rest. Spoelstra stressed there's been no setback for Wade, who has been on a knee-maintenance program throughout this season and is averaging 23.5 points on 62 percent shooting since the All-Star break.

Wade probably didn't mind sitting for this one. It gave him a courtside seat for the show.

James made three 3-pointers in the first 7 minutes of the quarter — he was 6 for 6 from beyond the arc at that point — and when Charlotte bit on his head fake from the top of the key, James coolly found Toney Douglas to set up another 3. A tip-in by James followed not long afterward and just like that, the lead was up to 83-63.

Charlotte scored the next six points, but any notion that the game was slipping from Miami's control was quickly extinguished.

James scored the next six himself, a pair of three-point plays to restore the 20-point edge and give him 43 points, already a season high.

All that was left to see was what he'd finish with.

The answer was history.

James has been asked plenty of times in recent weeks about the MVP race, especially with many prognosticators suggesting the trophy is likely headed to Oklahoma City's Kevin Durant.

Might be time to reopen the thinking on that one.

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"Every night I go on the floor I want to be the MVP, of this league, MVP of this team, MVP for me, myself and my family," James said. "I've set a high standard and I have to live by that."

On this night, he did. And more.