

## Begging for Table Scraps

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Monday, November 01 2010 2:15 PM - Last Updated Monday, November 01 2010 2:02 PM

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Have you ever fasted for a week? By the eighth day, you're ready to scarf down a big bowl of broccoli and asparagus.

If you've ever fasted for as long as two weeks, you start longing for sautéed earthworms and crickets.

And if you've fasted for a month, leaves and twigs start looking like a gourmet meal.

Well, friends, it's no secret anywhere in the Lower 48 that we fans of the three major Cleveland-based professional sports teams have been fasting for *46 years*. Which is to say that we're ready to eat dirt, because no kind of real meal appears to be forthcoming.

Into the foreseeable future, neither the Indians, nor the Browns, nor the Cavaliers have an

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honest shot at even a little thing like the last playoff spot. There's not a morsel in sight.

Yet our hopes and dreams are not dashed. That little voice in our brain tells us that we're light years from real contention, but our beating hearts tell us differently. If only the Tribe could come up with a couple sluggers in the off-season. Or maybe re-sign Cliff Lee. Or both. If only the Browns could dig up a franchise quarterback and a couple serviceable wide receivers. Maybe a defensive end ... or a cornerback ... or a safety. If only the Cavaliers could sign one or two coveted free agents before April. Hey, how about trading Leon Powe for Dirk Nowitzki, straight up? Think Mark Cuban would go for it?

(Sigh.)

The last four years have seen Cy Young winners CC Sabathia and Lee defect, along with The Traitorous Scuzball Who Shall Remain Nameless. Only the Browns haven't had any major defections -- but a gazillion quarterbacks, including a few high draft choices, have been pummeled into retirement.

Please, Lord, throw us a bone. Just one.

Under these extenuating circumstances, why do we even remain fans? Why do we continue to self-flagellate? We look at our friends who don't follow sports and see that they are so much happier than us that we'd like to hit them up side the head. We look at our wives or girlfriends who could care less about tailgating or wasting their time in front of the TV for three hours every Sunday afternoon. Yet they're happy as larks. Why can't we be like that?

Why? Because we've got a defective gene. Or two. Or three. That's gotta be the answer. Somewhere inside us, our chromosomes have been tied in knots by events beyond our comprehension. And there ain't no getting away from being fans, no matter how hard we try.

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It's not like we don't get table scraps thrown our way about once every decade. The Kardiak Kids of the early '80s. The Belle-Baerga-Ramirez-Thome Wahoos of the middle '90s. The Cavaliers of the last four or five seasons. They're all like the 20-foot putt on the 18th hole that gives the duffer an April round of 115 but coaxes him to come back and waste his money on greens fees all summer and into autumn. Yes, we keep coming back.

## The Psychology of Fandom

Reams of scholarly papers have examined the phenomenon of the sports fan. Some of the findings are so far off the path of mainstream psychology that you have to wonder about the mental stability of the people who wrote about them.

For instance, Dr. Edward Hirt of Indiana University has demonstrated that the self-esteem of both men and women who are diehard fans skyrockets after a victory. They are more optimistic about their sex appeal. They are more confident about their ability to perform well at mental and physical tests, like darts and word games. But when their favorite team loses, that optimism evaporates, Dr. Hirt found. (No shit, Sherlock.)

There's also a bit of physiology/biology involved. A study in Georgia showed that testosterone levels in male fans rise markedly after a victory and drop just as sharply after a defeat. (Please do not try to picture this in your head. It's not pretty.)

"Psychologists have long suspected that many die-hard fans are lonely, alienated people searching for self-esteem by identifying with a sports team," wrote James C. McKinley Jr. in the *New York Times*

. (Bad news, sports fans.) "But a study at the University of Kansas suggests just the opposite -- that sports fans suffer fewer bouts of depression and alienation than do people who are uninterested in sports." (Good grief! Did they conduct any of that research on *Cleveland* sports fans at any time during the last half-century?)

Beth Jacobson of the University of Connecticut wrote a paper on fandom. She does not speak kindly of sports fans. Maybe she's lost a half-dozen or so boyfriends or husbands over it; there can't be any other explanation for these observations:

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“Fandom allows individuals to be a part of the game without requiring any special skills (Branscombe & Wann, 1991). Sports fans have not generally been portrayed positively, especially in social science research. This is especially true of males, who are often stigmatized because of their fandom (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). Fans are criticized for their apparent lack of physical fitness as well as for being passive or lazy (Zillmann et al.), to the high levels of violence among fans including -- but not limited to -- hooliganism and riotous victory celebrations (Kutcher, 1983; Levy, 1989; Gantz and Wenner, 1995).”

### Come Hell or High Water

You can call me whatever you want, Ms. Jacobson. Lazy ass. Hooligan. Uncoordinated meatball. Fat slob. Just don't call me apathetic.

For I will be sitting in front of the television next Sunday afternoon, bedecked in my Tim Couch jersey, hoping against hope that Tom Brady doesn't slice through our porous defensive backfield like a hot knife through butter. And I will throw my orange-and-blue Mark Price jersey over my head to personally witness a few slaughters taking place at the Q before spring rolls around. Hell, I might even carry my Boog Powell/Rawlings first-baseman's mitt down to Progressive Field next summer. I will make the pilgrimage not because I dream that the Indians will win the game, but because I dream of one day catching a foul ball -- a circumstance that is far and away more probable than going home with a W. (Hey, can we call that foul ball a “bone”?)

I'm a fan. Can't explain it. Sometimes, can't even stomach it. But I am what I am, and that's all that I am -- and please pass the spinach.

Go Cavs. Go Browns. Go Tribe. I love you schmucks!