



The Indians probably owe their very existence in this town to their die-hard fans.

In the decades of the mid-20th Century, when losses outpaced wins on a yearly basis and postseason contention was a 35-year fantasy, someone had to form the small ring of humanity that barely clung to the dugout wall at Cleveland Stadium. Somebody had to be in that crowd of 3,000 on a chilly April night.

If you polled 100,000 people on who was at the Stadium to witness Len Barker's perfect game 32 years ago, some percentage would actually pass a lie detector test. They were honestly there.

Various ownership groups at various points toyed with the idea of moving the franchise to Minneapolis and New Orleans. If the Gateway project had died on the vine in the early 1990s, the Tampa-St. Petersburg area would have likely made a play for the franchise.

But somehow, through all the strain that decades of losing, coupled with regional economic decay, put on the relationship between the Indians and the city of Cleveland, the franchise stayed put and hardy fans kept showing up in small, but passionate, numbers.

Then Jacobs Field opened in 1994, and the team started winning. Not just winning – winning with drama, brashness and arrogance. For a city that had, for so long, meekly submitted to its circumstances, it was a seven-year catharsis as the Indians made the walk-off home run a calling card, winning two pennants and six division titles in the process. Albert Belle might have departed in free agency after the 1996 season, but his pitcher-melting scowl was the team's iconic image for the duration of the era.

And the fans fell in love. Did they ever. Tickets were harder to come by than they would have for a Beatles reunion tour circa 1976. Between 1995 and 2001, the team sold out 455 straight games. The Indians like to remind you of that every now and again, in case you've never noticed the giant "455" among the retired numbers in the right-field mezzanine at the now-named Progressive Field.

For the balance of the '90s, Tribe games were the place to be. Even if you didn't like or understand baseball all that much, it's what your coworkers would be talking about at the water cooler, so you paid attention.

It was the best of times for the Tribe. They might not have won a World Series, but they won just about every other conceivable accolade. And the turnstiles nearly spun off their hinges in the process. It paved the way for some fat payrolls as the 1990s gave way to the new century. For the first time ever, the Indians' payroll eclipsed \$90 million.

But as quickly as the love-fest started, it ended. Dick Jacobs sold the team to Larry Dolan in 2000. GM John Hart bolted town shortly thereafter. The team started to operate much more like a small-market outfit – bargain-conscious, spend-thrifty and, ultimately, talent-deprived. It was a bitter pill to swallow for Cleveland fans so used to winning and the accompanying spoils.

Some might say the fan base has yet to fully come around. Sure there have been some spikes in performance. The Indians won 93 games in 2005, losing out on the playoffs after a final-week meltdown. They held a 3-1 series lead over Boston in the 2007 ALCS, before crumbling to pieces and losing the series in seven games.

But consistent success – and even more fundamentally, franchise players to sustain consistent success – has and have eluded the Tribe. The 2005 and '07 seasons remain their only winning

seasons since 2001.

The fans have voted with their apathy. And maybe “apathy” isn’t a strong enough sentiment. This fan base is resistant, and maybe outright refuses to believe, that any uptick in performance by the Tribe is more valuable than fool’s gold.

Once again, we’re back to the Cleveland Stadium era, with the hardy few occupying a sea of otherwise-empty seats. As they were for much of last year, the Indians are dead last in Major League Baseball in attendance.

The so-called “casual” fans – the fans that make the difference between a crowd of 10,000 and a crowd of 35,000 -- simply don’t trust this organization anymore. Even after a winter-long spending spree that brought quality veterans Nick Swisher, Mark Reynolds and Michael Bourn to town, even after landing intriguing pitching prospect Trevor Bauer in a trade, the Indians are still background noise to a fan base that had once learned to fall in love all over again.

We have to make mention of the obligatory difference in circumstances between then and now. Then, the economy was in better shape. Then, we weren’t in the midst of a massive Innerbelt construction project that limits access to downtown. Then, the Indians weren’t competing with a casino for the public’s disposable income.

But that’s all antimatter in the end, because if the fans truly believed the Indians were a title contender, they’d show up. Nobody around here needs any prompting to remember the significance of the year 1964.

Yes, these 2013 Indians are dealing with the skid marks left over by flameouts in 2011 and ’12. Those were first-place teams around this time, too. They were both sucking wind by July and completely out of contention by September. But they’re also saddled by a 13-year legacy of distrust between the fan base and the club’s ownership.

They’re paying for the sins of years past, for two winning season in 12 years, for the heartbreak of ’05 and ’07, for the disastrous C.C. Sabathia and Cliff Lee trades. For the broken-down body

of Travis Hafner, seemingly right after the club signed him to a massive extension. You can't blame Hafner's physical breakdown on the organization, but it get lumped in there with everything else, fair or not.

They're paying for an endless string of quiet winters while the Tigers and White Sox spent handsomely to improve their clubs. The Indians do deserve credit for the biggest spending spree in franchise history this past winter, but one offseason of spending simply isn't enough to reverse over a decade of little to no spending, and often making fruitless decisions with what money they did have – the Kerry Wood signing comes to mind, in addition to Hafner.

It's not fair, because this is possibly the most talented team the Tribe has put on the field since the Jacobs-Hart era of contention ended after the '01 season. So far, all of the Tribe's offseason additions have contributed. Terry Francona is proving nightly that he's still one of the best managers in the business.

This team, far more than the teams of the past two years, and maybe even more so than the '07 team, has the ability to play contending baseball all year long. This is a playoff-caliber team.

But the Tribe's reputation is in shambles around the region. It didn't get that way overnight, and it's not going to be repaired overnight. The only thing the players can do is keep winning, keep providing evidence to the fans that this team is for real. Beyond that, it's a waiting game. We're going to find out in August and September, and in the coming years, if the bridge between the Indians and the ticket-buying public can once again stand as strong as it did more than a decade ago.