

It's been the most popular topic in town over the course of the last month: the Indians lackluster attendance. Erik Cassano looks at the issue in a different light. Like all of us, Erik has heard all the reasons being laid out there as to why the Indians aren't drawing. And he feels that most of them are bogus, debunking them one by one in his latest column for us.



If you've been paying attention to the Cleveland blogosphere recently (and I bet you have if you're reading this), the lack of attendance at Tribe games has been a [very popular subject](#).

Despite spending the majority of the season in first place, and being one game out at the all-star break, the Indians rank 25th out of 30 Major League Baseball teams in attendance, down with bottom-feeders like the Orioles and Nationals.

Everything you can probably expect out of a team with a bottom-tier payroll, the Indians have delivered -- and probably more. The Indians are not just competitive, they're contending. They're a major league-best 32-11 at home. Recently, Kelly S hoppach and Ben Francisco brought walk-off homer magic back to Jacobs Field.

The clouds are starting to lift a bit as attendance begins to rise for weekend series. The Tribe's last home game to date, July 2 against Tampa Bay, netted the biggest walk-up crowd in ballpark history. Some of that might have had to do with the Fourth of July fireworks show that night, but there were plenty of other places to watch free fireworks last week.

But attendance still lags. And the Tribe's overall ranking probably won't change much this year, even if attendance spikes in the second half. It's simply too late in the season to erase the bad numbers, like Joe Borowski's overinflated ERA.

There are several legitimate reasons why the Indians attendance is lagging. And several myths that need to be debunked, right here and now.

Legitimate reason: The Dolans are unwilling to make a big splash in free agency or through a trade.

Fans respond to sexy, marquee names. If they didn't, teams wouldn't spend outlandish sums of money to lure big-name players. While the Tigers have spent big bucks and made bold moves to land household names like Pudge Rodriguez, Kenny Rogers and Gary Sheffield, the Indians have gone with a far lower-key approach, one betting that wins will make the turnstiles click, not big names.

Wins do make the turnstiles click, but there is no substitute for landing the big player that gets the fans buzzing. That's not to say the Indians should go out tomorrow and mortgage the farm system to land Alex Rodriguez, but big players equal big fan interest.

Myth: The Cavs' playoff run diverted tons of gate revenue away from the Indians.

Not likely. As it is, Cleveland isn't a very strong basketball town. It's going to take a dynasty's worth of Cavs titles to change that, and even then, there are still going to be many middle-aged white suburbanites who simply identify more with a team of guys who look like them and talk like them playing a sport they grew up watching, as opposed to a team of heavily-tattooed, pre dominately black and European players playing a sport where everyone seems to be seven feet tall.

It's not prejudice. It's human nature to gravitate toward what is familiar. And in Northeast Ohio, baseball is far more familiar than basketball -- at least NBA basketball -- to many people.

What I'm getting at is, I don't think the fan bases of the Cavs and Indians overlap as much as we'd like to believe, certainly not so much that the

Cavs

' playoff run would suffocate the Indians at the gate. Not to mention

Cavs

playoff tickets were very difficult and expensive to acquire after the Nets series.

Legitimate reason: Cold weather killed the Tribe at the gate in April.

It started with an Easter weekend snowstorm that wiped out the entire opening series at Jacobs Field, then forced the next series to Milwaukee, and the remnants of winter continued to maintain an icy grip on the Tribe's home schedule throughout most of the season's first month.

Take it from someone who covered baseball at Bowling Green State University for three years: Few things in the world of spectator sports are worse than watching a baseball game in sub-freezing temperatures.

Baseball's laid-back pace is meant for warm evenings and sunny days, when it's a crime to be indoors any longer than it takes you to relieve yourself in the restroom. On days when the only thing you can think of is drinking coffee and getting indoors, the ballpark is the last place you want to be.

Until early May, the Indians simply had way too many of those kinds of days for home games. It put their attendance figures behind the 8-ball from the get-go.

Myth: The fans aren't showing up because they don't believe this team is for real.

Amazingly enough, fans usually don't cast that critical of an eye when deciding to spend their hard-earned money at a baseball game. Not even in Cleveland.

When Joe Parma Resident is considering whether to take the tribe to a Tribe game, whether the team is winning or not is actually down the list of variables that influence his decision. More important is affordability and availability of tickets and parking and what the promotion is that night -- because Junior will be crestfallen if he doesn't get that Grady Sizemore bobblehead.

When casual fans (which comprise the vast majority of fans) go to a Tribe game, they are going for the experience. They are not thinking, "Man, if Dolan would just shell out enough dough to add a decent seventh-inning middle reliever or a right-handed stick to split up Victor and Pronk, I'd be all over this team."

Don't get me wrong, winning definitely influences attendance. But winning teams

don't necessarily draw because they are winning. Winning teams draw because they create an atmosphere where games are "the place to be." I think that fact gets lost on some of us more hardcore fans at times.

Legitimate reason: Some fans are still sour because the Indians parted with their favorite player(s).

This is what 40 years of non-contention can do to a town:

From 1995 to 2001, Cleveland was a Leave It To Beaver baseball town competing in a Sopranos league.

Much of what we collectively remembered about winning baseball was from a different era when the Bob Feller in your pack of bubble gum cards was going to be the same Bob Feller from start to finish. Always an Indian, and always your favorite pitcher. Barring an Earth-shattering trade like the horrible fate Rocky Colavito suffered at the hands of Frank Lane, you never had to worry about seeing your heroes suit up for the other team.

But while Cleveland's sleeping baseball giant was sawing logs, free agency entered the picture, and hero worship took on a whole new meaning.

Suddenly, heroes went to the highest bidder when their contracts came up.

In 1995, Cleveland emerged from its baseball cryostasis, and all was good for about five years. We fell in love with Manny and Jimmy, DJ, Robbie, Sandy and Little O. Albert Belle, well he was just a big jerk who smashed thermostats and chased kids down in his car, so the White Sox could have him.

But soon thereafter, June Cleaver stopped baking us cookies and started chasing us around the house with a shotgun. Manny took the money and ran. So did Jimmy. DJ was traded to save cash, Robbie because he flaked out (again). Little O and Sandy were tossed aside like used car parts.

Fans that had been brought up to embrace Tribe players as their own were given a cold splash of modern baseball. Some still haven't gotten over it, so they keep

their emotional distance from the current Tribe under the blanket excuse of "What's the point? They'll all be playing somewhere else in a couple of years anyway."

Myth: It's the economy, stupid.

Two weeks ago, I was listening to one of the weekend sports yakkers on WTAM, and a caller phoned in to the show adamant that he had the real reason the Indians' attendance was lagging.

Cleveland's economy is in the garbage bin, he said. Fans can barely afford the necessities in life, so how can they afford to go to a baseball game?

There is no question the economy of Northeast Ohio has been eroding for decades. It's the cause of many problems. A lack of posteriors in the seats at Jacobs Field -- or any entertainment venue, for that matter -- is not one of them.

People spend money to be entertained whether times are lean or fat. Entertainment is one of the last things people want to part with, especially during difficult times when sports, drama, movies and music provide an escape.

If anything, Cleveland's sagging economy is an argument *against* sluggish attendance at Tribe games.

During the Great Depression, the story goes, some people would use their only nickel of the day to buy admission to the ballpark. If baseball hadn't been so important to people, franchises like the Cincinnati Reds and St. Louis Browns might not have survived the 1930s, and professional baseball would be a lot different today.

Despite nearly half a century of a downward economic spiral in this region, the Indians managed to sell out 455 straight games. The Browns sell out every game, no matter how bad the team is or how expensive the tickets are. Playhouse Square continues to operate, as does the Cleveland Orchestra, the museums at University Circle and about a half-dozen major concert venues in the area.

Say what you will about jobs leaving the area in droves and the population center of the country shifting to the Sun Belt. When it comes to empty seats in Cleveland-area entertainment venues, it's NOT the economy, stupid.