

Sign Of The Times

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Saturday, January 12 2008 7:00 PM -

The start of spring training is great for a lot of reasons. Baseball is back. The weather starts to turn here on the north coast. And it also signals the regular return of guys like Paulie Cous, Buff, and Tony to the front page of this website. In Paul's latest, he hits on the Indians changing the name of their stadium, and the fan reaction it set off when the news broke.



To quickly peruse the Saturday morning edition of the Plain Dealer, one (unaware of the announcement from the Indians yesterday) could come to one of two conclusions - either that the Plain Dealer (who committed the ENTIRE above-the-fold portion of the Front Page to the name change) has very little to report on a Saturday morning or that Jacobs Field has been scheduled for demolition. Since the former is obviously the true statement, the news about Jacobs Field is that the structure, under a different name, will continue to operate and serve as the home to the Cleveland Indians.

Never has a move like this caused such consternation and hand-wringing among fans, who called into radio stations all of Friday, calling for a "boycott" or a "way to fight this" change. Perhaps I'm mistaken, but I don't remember this public outcry when Gund Arena was essentially given a one-letter name by the new owner (who removed the name of the previous owner from the facility). I think that the reason for the difference between the reactions between the two name changes gets to the heart of the matter regarding the "end of the Jake". Whereas few good memories exist from the building when it was known as Gund Arena (unless your Wesley Person jersey is still in heavy rotation in your wardrobe), the 14 years that the Indians called Jacobs Field home is full of happy moments, magical memories, and favorite players.

It could easily be argued that the 14 years of the franchise, since moving into the ballpark at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario represent the "Golden Age" of Indians' baseball. With unprecedented success and playoff appearances, the Indians of the mid-to-late 90's and, more recently 2005 and 2007, The Jake became THE place to be...the place to see and to be seen. The fact that it had a cute nickname (probably one never envisioned by the Jacobs' brothers when they bought the naming rights in 1994) added to the ballpark's cache.

Yesterday, news that Jacobs Field would heretofore be known as Progressive Field was received by many as a supposed "End of An Era", when you could no longer tell friends to "meet at the Jake" to catch a Tribe game. And, while it certainly was a convenient and catchy name that Clevelanders could identify as their own, along the same lines as "The Garden" in Boston or "Candlestick" in San Francisco, times have changed in professional sports as the naming rights to a sports facility is another revenue stream utilized by most owners (quick, where do the Celtics and 49ers play now?) to assist in the upkeep of those facilities.

The Indians, like so many teams before them, sold the naming rights to their stadium...to a Cleveland company with ties to the community for 16 years to coincide when the Indians' 30-year lease with Gateway expires. When the Tribe re-ups with Gateway, Progressive (one of the few Fortune 500 companies remaining with local ties) will get the first crack at renewing the naming rights. Regardless of what you think of the catchiness of Progressive Field, it is simply a by-product of the changing face of American sports.

As for what we can all call the ballpark (for those not among the outraged, who will continue to call it The Jake, "no matter what"), why do we need some cutesy, monosyllabic nickname for our ballpark? Has the culture of Bennifer and Brangelina pervaded our sports world that we can't simply say that "we're going to the Indians' game" or "we'll see you at the Tribe game" or "meet you at the ballpark"?

I'll miss calling the ballpark the Jake more than many and it's not fun or convenient to lose the Jake moniker; but, again, wasn't the familiarity and love for the structure at East 9th more of a by-product of the superb product that was put on the field and not the sign that was posted outside the stadium? As long as the product remains viable and successful, does it really matter what the name of the

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stadium is?

The naming rights announcement is only a sign of the times of the changing world of professional sports and to those who feel that the Indians are "selling out", I can only hope that they're right...that they'll be "selling out" World Series games at whatever they decide to call their home.