



Last Wednesday, Bob Feller died. Last Thursday, the Sun came up -- as much as it can in Ohio, on one of the shortest days of the year.

Last Thursday, life went on. Just as it went on when Art Modell gave Baltimore a new lease on NFL life at our expense. Just like when we had to suffer the final-straw indignity of watching him win a Super Bowl five years later. Just like when LeBron told us we weren't good enough for him anymore, mere months ago.

There was something of a numb feeling about last Thursday. Like waking up the morning after Game 7 of the ALCS three years ago, Game 7 of the World Series 13 years ago, after the AFC title games in '86 and '87. It's over. It's really over.

Yeah, those were games. This was a life. But Feller represented so much about Cleveland that we want to remember. With his passing, we lost one of our most important links to that past, when Cleveland was the stately lady of the lakeshore, the manufacturing mecca that helped build America into a 20th Century world power on the sweaty brows and strained muscles of the men and women who went to work at the factories and mills each day.

A time when billowing smokestacks were a sign of profit and riches, not an environmental taboo. A time when the Indians were winners, a World Series parade was fresh in everyone's memory, and Cleveland was the polar opposite of the national punchline it would become in the ensuing decades.

Paul Simon wondered where Joe DiMaggio had gone. But even when times became less

simple and supposed American innocence withered in the face of social change and war in Southeast Asia, the Yankees still had Mantle. A decade later, they had Jackson and a pair of World Series titles. Then Donnie Baseball, then Derek Jeter and more titles. Now their roster is a monument to excess, even by their own standards. The cupboard was either stocked, or on its way to being stocked.

DiMaggio has been gone for 11 years. But DiMaggio's Yankees never really died. The names just change.

In Cleveland, the days of Feller are truly never coming back.

So it's fitting that Feller left us in December. A moment of silence at 7:05 p.m. before the first pitch of a midsummer home game wouldn't have yanked us out of our charmed summer existence nearly enough. We need the winter to meditate on the loss of Feller and everything he means to us and our history. We need him to not be there to throw out the first pitch of spring training, as he has been for years. We need March to become April, May, June and July, and all of the routines of what promises to be another mundane, non-contending Tribe season have a gaping hole where Feller used to be.

Then, we'll know what we've lost.

Last Thursday, the Sun came up cold and distant, offering little more than filtered light-droplets from behind hazy clouds. Downtown, street grates belched steam that covered salt-encrusted roads and sidewalks. The cold air sliced against open skin at the slightest movement.

If you wanted to pay tribute to Feller at his statue on the plaza by Gate C at Progressive Field, you had to wait. And people did come. At 10:30 in the morning, a few items lay on the base of the statue, which was splattered with salt residue like every outdoor surface in Cleveland.

A bouquet of yellow flowers. A small American flag, draped over itself. A package of sunflower seeds. A red capital A cut from a wooden block, to honor Feller's service on the U.S.S. Alabama during World War II. On the back, a note scribbled in pen:

"Mr Feller, thanks for fighting for our freedom!! Rest in peace & here's your lucky 'A!!!"

Cleveland's only sporting king is gone. Jim Brown wanted to make movies. LeBron wanted to go to school with the cool kids. That leaves Feller. A proud man with a lion's heart and an ego to match. The perfect combination of dominance and cockiness that exemplified our town, our region, in a different time, when you put a baseball career on hold indefinitely to go fight for your country because it was the right thing to do, then came back and helped your team win a World Series a few years later.

Anything was possible, and it wasn't just the hollow bloviations of a local political candidate stumping for votes.

Above the trinkets left at the Feller statue on Thursday morning, a yellow bow hung from Feller's bronze pitching hand. It's frozen in the split-second in which Feller is at the apex of his delivery, left leg airborne, ready to shove a 98-mile per hour heater down the throat of Ted Williams, or buckle DiMaggio's knees with a table-drop curve.

This was Feller at his zenith. Cleveland at its zenith. Something to admire. Something to fear. Something to reckon with. Something that now exists only in black and white and bronze.