

Picking Your Poison

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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When Cleveland Indians' reliever Chris Perez popped off a few weeks ago about the lack of support for the Tribe generally and in relation to the Browns in particular, it was an outsider's view. And if there is anything Cleveland fans like less then rooting for crappy teams year over year it is outsiders questioning their sanity for doing so.

Putting aside Perez specifically, the approach of the locals is difficult to understand for the natives so it's natural it would be even more confounding to the outsider. It's about to get even more so with Browns training camp on the cusp of gearing up.

As sure as Randy Lerner invoking images of his youth spent his Browns PJs as a measure of his commitment to the organization fans will line the practice fields of Berea and chant "Super Bowl" at the first sign of Brandon Weeden or Trent Richardson. It will as it always does stand in stark contrast to the lack of passion expressed by any Indians fans at any game this season.

It's just true. Cleveland is a Browns town first and always will be. There simply is no amount of abuse too great that the Browns and their ever-changing-except-the-results management can heap on the fans and change this outcome. On the other hand all the Indians management would need to do is flash a picture of David Dallucci on the Jumbotron to give fans a reason not to attend any game that doesn't end in a fireworks display.

When the Indians were multi-year contenders for a brief period in the mid 1990s, Cleveland was

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still a Browns town even though the team was on a hiatus. It's a function of the nature of the sport and the nature of the teams over their existence that has served to define the inherent DNA of the town.

Baseball is a loping sport whose beauty is defined more by its subtlety. Its pace matches a summer evening but these days that's seen as a negative. Football is as subtle as a sledgehammer. It moves quickly and always carries with it the hint of something really bad happening to someone. We like to see people crashing into each other and though we may cringe we secretly like to see people get maimed. Not much has changed in that regard since the days of the gladiators.

But it's also a function of the teams. There was a point (decades old now, of course) when the Browns were perennial winners and the world knew it. As a franchise it got off on the right foot and moved forward for years in the right direction. Sure it's come off its axis for at least the last generation but the most significant part of the fan base still has very fond memories of teams that actually won even if they ended up breaking your heart. That currency still spends pretty easily.

Except for that too brief period of time in the 1990s, the Indians have been perennial losers and not even lovable ones. That same fan base that still has fond memories of successful Browns teams has nothing even remotely close to similar memories of the Indians. The standard joke was that it was hoped that the Indians could at least be competitive until the Browns opened camp. Too often that wasn't even the case.

If you didn't understand this small bit of history then it does seem improbable that fans would still pour money down the rat hole that the Browns' franchise has become while refusing to spend a fraction of that price to support the Indians. As a slice in time, neither franchise is in any sort of golden era at the moment. That said, Perez has a point.

As a franchise, the Indians are far closer to competing for a World Series title than the Browns are for a Super Bowl and that doesn't look to change any time soon. That doesn't mean either is close to its ultimate goal but as between the two the Indians do give a fan more to cheer for.

Even if the Browns could somehow manage to eke out enough wins this coming season to

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actually make the playoffs, they would still be barely within sight of the best teams in the league. On the other hand, assuming the Indians don't make the playoffs this season they are well within sight of the best teams in the league.

Start with the notion that whether or not you agree with it philosophically, the Indians have a consistency in its management that the Browns would sorely love to have. Owners have changed and so have managers yet there is still a direct line in the management and direction of the franchise from the transformative years of the mid-1990s to today.

The Browns, well, we all know about the Browns. Randy Lerner as owner confuses passion with commitment. All that's done is create several vastly different approaches by several vastly different regimes. Like a screwball comedy, chaos has ensued.

Next look at the quality of the players each is currently putting on the field. You can debate the merits of so-called lists (which is what they're really for) but the latest compilation of the NFL's best 100 players wasn't very kind to the locals, for good reason. Outside of Joe Thomas, there isn't a player on either side of the ball that forces an opposing coordinator to plan around.

Some of that might change, particularly if Richardson stays healthy and Weeden proves to be more than an old rookie. But for now and for the last several years teams have beaten the Browns regularly not by exploiting the Browns' weaknesses but by running whatever the hell they wanted to at them. Maybe that's the same thing.

The Indians on the other hand do have some players to contend with. Their starting pitching is uneven but in the kind of way that suggests that most are good pitchers still acquiring veteran savvy. The bullpen has been very serviceable, often bailing out the uneven starting pitching. And but for two blown saves that bookended the first half of the season, Perez has been all that any team could want in a closer.

Asdrubal Cabrera is a star and Shin Shoo-Choo is on the cusp. Jason Kipnis is an interesting player that most teams would covet. Michael Brantley has played like a young, good player often does—sometimes good sometimes not. Carlos Santana is valuable.

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Where the Indians lack are on the corners and in the power positions. It's what is holding them back from being truly formidable. But at least they are in the conversation.

What's holding the Browns back are things far more fundamental. There's a regime in place that for the most part deserves the trust it covets but the team has been so devoid of talent for so long that the climb back is perilous.

If you want to consider it from just a financial standpoint, it's also far easier to support the Indians. The games aren't cheap but they aren't nearly as expensive as a Browns game either. That may be a bit of an apples and pineapples comparison because of the limited number of home Browns games, but ultimately if you're a family choosing to attend just one game of either, the Indians are a far better value.

No one accused Cleveland fans of logic nor is there any reason to question the wisdom of their choices. They are honestly earned. Indeed the case could be made that neither team will ever improve to the point of being compelling if fans blindly support whatever mess they're given.

Still, it is worth keeping in mind the words of an occasional outsider, if only to maintain some perspective. Whatever bones there are to pick with the Indians' owners and management, they at least haven't been trying to sell chaos as progress.