

## A Wasted Asset

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, January 21 2007 7:00 PM -

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What the hell has happened to the Plain Dealer sports page? This is the question Gary Benz poses in his latest effort. Pick up the Plain Dealer sports on any day and there is an undeniable sameness and blandness. The game stories, irrespective of the team, are largely uninteresting. The columnists, particularly Bill Livingston, rarely venture very far out on a limb or say anything remotely controversial. While Gary admits that the daily paper will never go away completely, the Plain Dealer sports sections relevance continues to decay.



You can tell the Cavaliers are on their annual winter west coast trip and the games are being played past the bedtime of at least one Plain Dealer columnist. It's January 22, 2007, the Cleveland Browns played their last game three weeks ago and now, just now, Bill Livingston offers his take about Braylon Edwards and Phil Savage in this morning's Plain Dealer.

Of course, you had to sort through about three paragraphs to figure out what the heck Bill was talking about since he started his column talking about Eric Snow. Usually Bill doesn't start to veer wildly off course until five or six paragraphs into his thrice-weekly mess. As near as we can figure, Bill has come to the conclusion that the Browns and Savage just don't "get it." He surmises that Savage just doesn't understand Cleveland fans. According to Bill, we don't dislike Braylon Edwards because he's a Michigan Wolverine, we dislike Edwards because he drops passes.

Actually, we do dislike Edwards because he is a Michigan Wolverine and because he's a loud mouth, me-first prima donna whose mediocre production doesn't match his overinflated opinion of himself. And because he drops passes. But thanks, Bill, for the observations. Day late meet dollar short.

In another story from this morning's paper that we think is directly related to our overall point, Plain Dealer editor Doug Clifton announced that he'll be retiring on June 1, ending an 8-year stint at Cleveland's only daily newspaper. When Clifton looks back on all he surveys, hopefully he'll come to grips with the notion that at this point, the best people can say about the PD is that it used to have a good sports section.

But that was years and years ago. Pick up the Plain Dealer sports on any day and no day in particular and there is an undeniable sameness and blandness. The game stories, irrespective of the team, are largely uninteresting. The columnists, particularly Livingston, rarely venture very far out on a limb or say anything remotely controversial. The fact that now Livingston chose to write about Edwards and Savage at a time when he doesn't have to run into either for several months just illustrates the point.

Perhaps this is the kind of malaise that creeps into an organization when it doesn't perceive a need to be competitive. And at the Plain Dealer, they still act as if they have the market to themselves. That's true, but only if one defines the market as narrowly as the PD does. What they fail to realize is that on any given day, there are probably a dozen better sources on the internet for Cleveland sports fans to gain a more interesting and deeper perspective into what's happening than the Plain Dealer seems willing to offer.

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Sure, the Plain Dealer has a modest internet presence. It consists of providing the same bland columns that one can find in print and an occasional podcast from Tony Grossi. Pretty ground breaking stuff. Given their modest objectives, it seems like the PD is still worried that this internet thing may be a fad as they hardly even begin to take advantage of the potential that the immediacy of the internet offers, which is good news to sites like this.

But we don't think that daily newspapers are ever going to suddenly disappear like Chuck on "Happy Days." Nor do we think it is ultimately a good thing that the Plain Dealer is a mediocre presence in this community. As we've said before and we'll say again, part of the problem in this town is that the sports teams in this town have produced such crappy products for such a long period of time, the fans have come to embrace mediocrity as an acceptable state of affairs. We no longer push for excellence and thus get what we deserve.

And the Plain Dealer, as the only Cleveland daily newspaper, is a big part of the problem. It is so casual in approach to how it covers sports these days that it simply isn't in the position to even identify excellence, let alone demand it from the various teams and their representatives and hold them accountable when they fall short.

Despite its continuously dwindling readership, the PD could still play a vital role in helping shape this community. But the institutional boredom that seemed to set in years ago shows no signs of abating. As a result, a needed asset and advocate for change is absent. But on the other hand, as long as they keep letting Livingston chew up newsprint three times a week, there will always be a reason to laugh. It's just not for the reasons the PD probably intended.