

The 10 Most Memorable Seasons Of The Last 25 Years

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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We may not have a championship to show for it, but part of the fun of being a fan is the chase for that elusive championship. And, even when you don't win, sometimes a season can still be very satisfying. In his latest, Tony Lastoria takes a look at the ten most memorable seasons in Cleveland over the last 25 years. And here's hoping we can add "2006-07 Cavaliers" to this list soon.



As Cleveland fans, we've mostly endured heartache and pain when it comes to the sports teams in this town for over 40 years, and especially in the last 25 years with some excruciating losses. The Drive. The Fumble. The Shot. Jim Poole. Edgar Renteria. The Collapse. The list is endless. We've become experts at coming up with catchy two-word phrases to sum up every tough loss we have stomached.

Let's face it, in the last 40-some years there hasn't been anything to celebrate in this town as far as professional sports championships go. In lieu of championships, though, we still have enjoyed several seasons and great runs by our beloved Browns, Indians, and Cavaliers, and many moments from these seasons are cherished almost as if we had won it all.

While we always eventually lose in the end, prior to those outcomes we had a lot of fun along the way and these days that is all we have to hang our hat on in this town. Not being a champion, but just good. Whether it be the Indians pennant races in 2000 and 2005 where we came up just short, the Browns back-to-back AFC Championship disasters against Denver in 1986 and 1987, or the jumper Michael Jordan hit over Craig Ehlo to prematurely send the Cavaliers home for the rest of the 1989 NBA playoffs, we have had some very tough losses but also experienced several thrills along the way.

We may not have a championship to show for it, but part of the fun of being a fan is the chase for that elusive championship. And, even when you don't win, sometimes a season can still be very satisfying.

Here is a look at the ten most memorable seasons in the last 25 years. With the 2007 NBA playoffs underway, the 2006-07 Cavaliers very well could crack such a top ten list in the future, especially if they reach the Finals, or knock-on-wood win it all. I am sure your list is different

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from mine, so feel free to [e-mail](#) me with what you would change. Also, you can talk about the list on TheClevelandFan.com [message boards](#) .

10. 1988-89 Cleveland Cavaliers – *Playoffs, First Round*□

For the first time since the Miracle of Richfield in 1976, the Cavaliers fans had a legit powerhouse and true championship contending team. After living through the Ted Stepien years, things looked promising for Cavaliers fans under new owners George and Gordon Gund as the team was rebuilt through trades and draft picks. What emerged was a very nice core of Brad Daugherty, Mark Price, Larry Nance, Ron Harper and John L. Williams.

The Cavaliers were tabbed “The Team of the 90s” and looked like they would make due on that prediction when they won a franchise-record 57 games in the 1988-89 season. The Cavaliers were a beast at home, going 38-3 on the year and at one point winning 22-straight games at home which lead to many fun nights at old Richfield Coliseum. Unfortunately, the fun came to an end abruptly when Michael Jordan and the Bulls shocked the NBA world by beating the Cavaliers in the first round of the playoffs.

After going 6-0 against the Bulls in the regular season, the Bulls took game one in Cleveland, and eventually were up 2-1 in the best-of-five series. The Cavaliers clawed back with a thrilling win in overtime in Game Four, before losing in Game Five to the Bulls in “The Shot” game. The Cavaliers lost only three home games all year in 41 games during the regular season, but lost two out of three postseason games. The season still serves as one of the lone bright spots in Cavalier history the past 25 years, or in franchise history for that matter.

9. 1989 Cleveland Browns – *AFC Championship*□

Head coach Marty Schottenheimer left the team after the 1988 season, which was the beginning of the end for the Browns as we know them. But, under the direction of new head coach Bud Carson, the Browns had one last hurrah and made it all the way to the AFC Championship before being beat handily by the Elway Broncos.

Still, along the way, there were many exciting moments during the season, including the massacre of the Pittsburgh Steelers in the season opener 51-0, and two comeback wins the last two weeks of the year when they beat the Vikings on a fake field goal by tossing a touchdown pass to Van Waiters and when Kevin Mack led the way to a late victory against the Oilers in the season finale. The Browns also played a thrilling game against the Buffalo Bills in the playoffs, holding on for dear life at the end before the game was sealed with an interception near the goal line. Wide receiver Webster Slaughter also had an amazing season totaling over 1200 yards and several long touchdown catches, temporarily renaming Municipal Stadium as “The Slaughter House”. The end of the decade was reached, and the 90s would usher in an ugly and ongoing chapter in Browns lore.

8. 2000 Cleveland Indians – *Pennant Race*□

For the first time since the 1950s, Cleveland fans witnessed what a pennant race is all about in

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baseball. The daily ups, downs, twists and turns were exhausting emotionally the final two months of the 2000 season. The Indians had made the playoffs in each of the previous five seasons from 1995-1999, but never really faced much of a challenge in getting to the playoffs. All that changed in 2000.

The Indians were ravaged with injuries to their pitching staff, as they used a record 32 different pitchers throughout the year, and 13 different starting pitchers. The injuries hurt the Indians, and put them in a hole by August 1st with a record of 52-51, which put them 11.5 games behind the Central Division leading White Sox and 6.5 games in back of wildcard leading Oakland. But, the Indians mounted a furious comeback, going 38-20 the rest of the way to finish 90-72. In the end, they would finish a game out of the wildcard, and key losses the last week to the hapless Royals (twice) and Twins (twice) did them in. The Indians missed the playoffs, but the late season pennant race they took the fans on was one of the most exciting rides most have been a part of for any sport in this town.

7. 2005-06 Cleveland Cavaliers – *Conference Semis*□

The Cavaliers make the playoffs for the first time since the 1997-1998 season, and make it in year three of the LeBron James Era. And boy, what an exciting playoff it was for the Cavaliers.

After winning 50 games in the regular season and LeBron playing MVP-caliber basketball, the Cavaliers were the #4 seed and played the #5 seed Washington Wizards in one of the best basketball playoff series these eyes have ever seen. In three of the Cavaliers four wins they won it on their final shot, including LeBron's most defining moment as a pro in Game Five when he went baseline around the entire Wizards teams with seconds left and dropped in a short runner in front of the basket for the win. It was a heavyweight fight between the game's two up-and-coming stars LeBron and the unstoppable Gilbert Arenas.

After the Cavaliers dispatched the Wizards, they tangled with the East's best, the Detroit Pistons. The Cavaliers battled back from an 0-2 series deficit to take the series lead 3-2 and were heading home for Game Six. The Cavaliers fell a rebound short in Game Six, and eventually succumbed to the Pistons in the deciding Game Seven. The 2006 playoffs were only the beginning of what many feel will be several runs at an NBA Championship in the coming years with Lebron.

6. 2005 Cleveland Indians - *Pennant Race*□

Probably the best Indians regular season this town has experienced since the days of Bob Feller and company. While the 1995 season was joy and a fun ride and the 1996-1999 seasons were considered a tune-up before the playoffs, the 2000 and 2005 Indians seasons brought something this town really hadn't seen in years: a pennant race. 2005 outranks 2000 because of the resurgence of the team from rebuilding in "The Plan" from 2002-2004. Fans were excited about good baseball being back, and boy were they treated the final two months.

For two months, the Indians were the best team in baseball, the fans held their breath on every pitch, and we were seemingly on course to win a World Series title. Just about everyone

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sensed it. During their run late in the season they were widely considered the favorites to win it all as they had the best pitching staff in the American League and one of the top five offenses in baseball. The last two months of the season they were 41-19, which included a stretch from September 5th through the 24th where they were 19-2.

But, as always, The Cleveland Experience (TCE) reared its ugly head once again and just when we all thought we might finally break out of it, we finish 1-6 the final week of the season and miss the playoffs. In the end, it was a breakout year for several young players such as Grady Sizemore, Travis Hafner, Victor Martinez, Jhonny Peralta, and others that many fans have grown to adore.

5. 1987 Cleveland Browns - AFC Championship

The Browns showed no ill effects from the hangover that was "The Drive" the previous season, and went on to go 10-5 in a season where one game was lost to the player strike and three other games were played by replacement players. Once again, it was Bernie! Bernie! and the Dawgs, as the team boasted eight pro bowlers and this city had orange and brown fever. Fans were attached to players by the names of Byner, Kosar, Slaughter, Fontenot, Mack, Langhorne, Brennan, The Cube, Dixon, Golic, Matthews, Minnifield, Risien, and more. It was a laundry list of names fans gravitated to, which is a sad reminder of how bad the Browns are today.

After an exciting 38-21 win over the Indianapolis Colts in their first playoff game, the Browns would once again have to get past Denver to get to the Super Bowl. After a lackluster first half that saw Elway and the Broncos torch the Browns for a 21-3 halftime lead, the Browns played an inspiring second half led by Kosar and Earnest Byner. It looked like we would return the favor with a late game touchdown to tie the score, but Earnest Byner fumbled away the Browns chance at redemption. The loss still hurts, but that second half is one of the best and most exciting 30 minutes of Browns football these eyes have ever seen. Even with yet another tough loss to swallow, this season and playoff run was a blast, and right up there with the 1986 season as one of the best Browns seasons since the 60s. Only the Cardiac Kids of 1980 arguably top the 1986/1987 Browns seasons in the modern era.

4. 1991-92 Cleveland Cavaliers - Conference Finals

For the first time since the 1988-89 season, the Cavaliers were healthy. After showing so much promise in that 1988-89 season with the young core of Mark Price, Brad Daugherty, Ron Harper and John L. Williams in addition to the veteran Larry Nance, the Cavaliers had injury woes the next two years in the 1989-1990 and 1990-1991 seasons which prevented them from getting out of the first round in 1989-90 and making the playoffs in 1990-91.

The Cavaliers were a delight to watch offensively with Price at the point and players like Daugherty and Nance in the frontcourt. Defensively, Williams, Daugherty and Nance made up their own SWAT team. The Cavaliers finished the season 57-25, which to date is still the best single season in franchise history (tied with the 1988-89 57-win season).

After dispatching the New Jersey Nets in the first round, in the conference semis the Cavaliers

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were matched up with the vaunted Boston Celtics in an exciting series that went the full seven games, including a thrilling overtime game at The Garden the Cavaliers pulled out in a must-win Game Four to tie the series up 2-2. The Cavaliers ended up facing their nemesis Michael Jordan and the Bulls in the conference finals, and actually blew the Bulls out in Game One and the series was tied 2-2 after four games, but the Bulls wound up winning the final two to take the series.

3. 1986 Cleveland Browns - AFC Championship

For most of us in our early to late 30s, this was probably our first tough loss as newbies to the Cleveland fan fraternity, and probably the toughest loss for most Cleveland fans to get over. "There is a gleam, men." I still get shivers down my spine every time I hear that quote on NFL Films from head coach Marty Schottenheimer as he rallied up the troops before kickoff.

We were already booking our flights to Super Bowl XXI after Kosar to Brennan late in the fourth quarter led to a thrilling touchdown, and then we pinned the Broncos back at the two yard line deep in the Dawg Pound with about five minutes to go in the game. Of course, 98 yards later the score was tied with under a minute remaining, and the beginning of the John Elway Legacy was born. Elway would continue to torment the Browns and their fans for the rest of the decade. "The Drive" officially started a string of tough losses for Cleveland sports fans, who were about to endure six crushing defeats in the three sports as well as the loss of their football team the next ten years. Jordan and Elway would many times stand in the way of Cleveland teams trying to win a championship.

Still, this may have been the best Browns season I have witnessed in my short lifetime. A 12-4 record, including winning eight of their last nine games. "Bernie, Bernie" blaring on the radios. The Dawg Pound in its glory. Two exciting playoff games, including the miraculous come from behind win at home against the Jets down 20-10 with four minutes left and eventually winning in double overtime. Five pro bowlers. Arguably the best offense/defense combination in the league. Can you believe this was just over 20 years ago already? Wow.

2. 1997 Cleveland Indians - World Series Runner-up

This is as close this town has been to a professional sports title in the last 40 years. Up 2-1 in the 9th inning in Game Seven with Jose Mesa on the mound with three outs to go before pure pandemonium in Cleveland. The fans were abuzz with excitement, whether at home watching on TV, or stuffed into the bars taking it all in. Then, four batters later the game is tied, and you could hear a pin drop in all of Northeast Ohio. And, of course, we eventually lose in extra innings on an Edgar Renteria soft line drive up the middle that Charles Nagy just missed catching.

Nonetheless, what a thrilling postseason when you look back on it, especially considering how we were never given much of a chance to beat the Yankees and Orioles that year. There were several exciting close games including Game Four of the American League Division Series (ALDS) when Sandy Alomar tied the game with an 8th inning opposite field home run wall-scraper off the invincible Mariano Rivera, or in the American League Championship Series

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(ALCS) against the Orioles with the failed suicide squeeze in extra innings that still won the game and also a thrilling extra inning 1-0 win in Game Six of the ALCS.

The regular season was not much fun, as the Indians sleepwalked to an 86-75 record, but the postseason run more than made up for it. Oh how I long for October baseball. Nothing tops it in any sport. Nothing.

1. 1995 Cleveland Indians - *World Series Runner-up* □

In the last 25 years, no season has been as fun as this one from start to finish. It was a magical season that was kept from a happy ending by an unbelievable Braves pitching staff and a Jim Poole meatball to David Justice. The Indians won 100 games in just 144 games played, they were #1 in the league in pitching and hitting, and for once OUR team was the Top Dog in a sport. When has a Cleveland team ever been the consensus best team in their sport during the regular season? Maybe not since the 60s when Jim Brown was with the Browns.

The Indians had lots of young stars by the names of Belle, Lofton, Ramirez, Vizquel and Thome. The season lacked truly intense moments until the playoffs because we led the division by a gazillion games, but it was still a season-long party and the team was entertaining winning games in excitable fashion almost every night. The playoffs brought out the finger-nail biting moments, and we had some great moments like the heroic home run in extra innings by Tony Pena against the Red Sox in Game One of the ALDS, to Thome's late game jack against Seattle in the pivotal Game Five of the ALCS, to Lofton scoring from second on a passed ball in Game Six of the ALCS, and to Eddie Murray's extra innings game winner against the Braves in Game Three of the World Series.

In the end, the outcome was no different, as we suffered another tough loss when a championship was within reach, but the 1995 season is a season that is unmatched by any Cleveland team in the last 40 years, and almost ever.

Honorable Mentions

1988 Cleveland Browns- After Kosar went down in the season opener, backups Danielson and Pagel also were lost by mid-season, so the Browns turned to veteran signal-caller Don Strock to save their season. Injuries aside, this was a great season filled with some exciting games, especially the "snow" game in a must win home game in the season finale to make the playoffs.

1994 Cleveland Indians- Brand new ballpark, exciting young team, revitalized city, and a fan-base that had not seen a winner in baseball in virtually two generations. All the ingredients necessary to ignite a fan craze from 1995-2000 which was unprecedented in pro sports. The 1994 season was a season of ups and downs of great baseball, cut short in mid-August by the lockout.

1996 Cleveland Indians- Coming off the magical 1995 campaign, it was going to be tough to live up to expectations. The honeymoon was over. The Indians once again bashed their way to the playoffs winning 99 games, although they were not quite as dominating as they were in 1995,

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particularly in the pitching department which took a huge step back. Robbie Alomar and the Orioles took us out in the ALDS, in a Joe Mesa choke job which turned out to be a precursor to his 1997 World Series gack.

2002 Cleveland Browns- The lone winning season out of the eight years the Browns have been back since they returned in 1999. This season is the only source of salvation for Browns fans who have seen their team stuck in a rudderless suck since their return. The Browns finish 7-3 the last ten games to squeak into the playoffs, and are in command in Pittsburgh up by double digits most of the game before TCE crops up yet again.