

## Enjoying The Ride

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Is this really happening? The Indians are in first place. The Cavs just swept a playoff series and are awaiting an opponent for the Eastern Conference Semifinals. And the Browns are coming off their most promising draft in decades. This is Cleveland ... right? In Gary's latest, he says it's all good right now in C-Town.



For a town starved for any good sports news, the recent doings of Cleveland's major league teams was, for once, simultaneously positive. Try to remember the last time that happened and in the process, don't pull a hamstring, get a high ankle sprain, or incur a staph infection.

Going against trend, Indians Manager Eric Wedge has the team playing good baseball in April, instead of waiting until after they are too far gone to make a difference. The Cavaliers and Head Coach Mike Brown bucked a similar trend by sweeping the Washington Wizards in the first round of the NBA playoffs instead of losing their focus and playing down to the level of competition before finally advancing after a grueling seventh game. And the Browns, yes the Browns, bucking easily the biggest trend of all, re-energized its fan base by finding a way to actually get something done just when everyone had grown used to the inevitable hand-wringing over why, again, things just didn't come together for them the way they had hoped.

For too long it seems hope has been the central strategy and approach of the Indians, Cavs and Browns. Each team in their own way has over promised and under delivered year in and year out. While it may be too soon and probably is to make any grand conclusions, fans can at least now see things coming together in a way that suggests that living in the abyss need not be a permanent state.

Consider the evidence. The meteorological impediments to getting this year's Indians' season

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going seemed to offer the kind of build in excuse that Wedge often looks for to explain another slow start. But to his credit, Wedge didn't allow the team to dwell on the elements or the cards they were dealt, including a home series in Milwaukee and, instead, kept them more or less focus. As a result, they have plugged away, played good ball, beat teams they're supposed to beat, and finished the month at 14-8 and in first place.

Sometimes, it seems that this team is winning in spite of itself. They play lousy fundamental baseball, committing too many errors and baserunning mistakes. They've developed an early knack for not getting the big hit. But the pitching is coming through in virtually all phases, helping to erase all manner of sins. In fact, to the extent there has been any disappointment whatsoever, it's been with Jake Westbrook whom GM Mark Shapiro recently signed to a 3-year \$33 million dollar extension. Perhaps Westbrook is feeling a little early pressure to live up to the confidence displayed in him by the extension. But if he struggles, the Indians have depth to handle that kind of disruption.

The Cavaliers have been a tease and a frustration all season. Entering the season with a status quo strategy that hinged on a healthy Larry Hughes, the Cavs nonetheless struggled to match last season's 50-win total. The two biggest problems throughout were the lengthy mental lapses they seemed to take in nearly every game and the tendency to play down to the competition. In both cases, the head coach, himself a work in progress, seemed unable to find a way to correct either problem.

At playoff time, the biggest worry for Cavs fans in the first round was whether the Cavs would continue these trends and thus make an early exit, even though the Wizards were without their two best players. In some ways, those trends did continue. Several times in the Washington series the Cavaliers vacillated between truly great and truly horrendous basketball. They had a 17-point lead going into the second half of game 3 and watched it disappear faster than a box of Twinkies in Mel Turpin's cupboard. And while they seemed to struggle in each game with Washington, despite the absence of Gilbert Arenas and Caron Butler, the Cavs did find a way to win each time, two of which were on the road. This sweep was huge as it gives them ample time to rest and prepare for what looks like the New Jersey Nets in round two.

As for the Browns, already so much has been written that little bears repeating. Still, the suddenness with which they were able to grab back the fans in such a dramatic fashion rivals

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only the excitement felt when the franchise finally returned in 1999. As everyone knows, the reality of an expansion team given little chance to ready itself for the rigors of the NFL hit once the regular season got under way and, for all the fits and starts in between, has continued to plague this team since.

That's what makes what happened this past Saturday so scary and exhilarating at the same time. Fans simply aren't used to anything dramatic-good happening to the Browns and can't believe what seems to be their good fortune in landing three potential starters, all of whom can and should contribute almost immediately. The way in which this was all accomplished, of course, was not without its pathos. Following the drafting of Joe Thomas, the callers into both WTAM and WKNR were all over the map. While most agreed that Thomas was a good and safe pick, they were still upset with the gaping holes in the skill positions, particularly quarterback. Many were complaining that passing up Brady Quinn would come back to haunt them for years.

One particularly animated caller got off what was probably the best line to that point. Complaining about what seemed to be Savage's decision to stick with quarterback Charlie Frye once Thomas was drafted, the caller remarked: "Great. Now instead of having only 2 or 3 seconds to stare down one receiver, Frye will now have 4 or 5." You could almost hear a half a million heads nod in agreement. But when the trade was made and the pick of Quinn announced, the calls were nearly all positive, the picks of Thomas AND Quinn satisfying both schools of thought. And for the few days since, the calls remain mostly positive.

Of course, this being Cleveland, no one can ever truly be happy. You are beginning to see the initial stages of the inevitable backlash over trading next year's number one pick, with many surmising that it's likely to be a top 5 pick, again. That may be true, but it's just as true that there is no way to predict what that pick would yield—another Gerard Warren or another Joe Thomas. What's particularly fascinating about this school of thought is that those who make it lack any sense of irony. They distrust Savage's judgment in surrendering the pick while simultaneously assuming that had he kept it he'd make the right decision with it next year.

The other interesting aspect of the backlash is that it really does, in many ways, represent the pulse and psyche that are Cleveland sports and its fans. There is a contingent out there that will bleed brown and orange or blue and red or whatever colors the Cavs are going by these

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days no matter the issue. You see that in every city. If you need proof, look at the Patriots fans that are applauding the acquisition of proven malcontent and team cancer Randy Moss or the San Francisco Giants fans who continue to applaud Barry Bonds. But there is also a healthy contingent, reared on one disappointment after another, that would just as easily complain if, say, the Browns won the Super Bowl. The complaint, of course, would be that there is no way they could repeat as champs the following year.

There is simply no way of telling at this point whether the Indians strong start portends great things for the rest of the season. Likewise, there is no way of telling whether the Cavs disturbing trend of losing focus will prevent them from advancing to at least the Eastern Conference finals. And there is nothing less certain, particularly right now, than whether first-day draft picks ultimately will pan out. This may be the calm before another inevitable storm or it may be the start of something good and unique for a change. But rather than expect the worst or hope for the best, it's enough at this moment to enjoy the current ride and remember, as John C. Reilly's character Gus Sinski said to Kevin Costner's Billy Chapel just after he pitched a perfect game in the movie "For Love of the Game" "right now we don't stink."