

The city of Detroit added another professional sports title to their stable, as the Detroit Red Wings defeated the Pittsburgh Penguins in the Stanley Cup Finals. In his latest, Erik Cassano talks about his personal jealousy over our neighbors to the north and east winning titles, and what not winning any here in Cleveland has done to the collective self-image of the inhabitants of our fine city. In Cleveland, sports is the Great Uniter in good times, and the Great Demotivator in bad times.



My girlfriend is originally from Michigan. Both sides of her family are from Michigan. Most of her friends are from Michigan. When we get together with her extended family for birthdays, anniversaries and whatnot, it's usually at a location in or around Detroit. At those gatherings, the subject -- at least among the guys -- sooner or later shifts to sports.

Of course, I'm the only Clevelander in the room, so I immediately take a defensive posture, readying myself for a trip down Jealousy Road into Envy Town. Interspersed with the banter about the Wolverines, Tigers and Lions is the occasional question directed at me. They're good people and only trying to have a bit of fun, but sometimes it's a little too easy to make fun of a Cleveland fan.

From a family gathering in January: "Hey, Erik, were you disappointed about the Browns not making the playoffs?" which was pre-emptively answered from across the room by another Michigander: "Aw, he's from Cleveland. He's used to it."

From a wedding last October, as I was trying desperately to not get updates about Game 6 of the ALCS, so it wouldn't ruin my evening if the Indians lost: "Hey Erik, grand slam, Boston! Not looking good for your Indians!"

I had to spend an entire car ride from Detroit to Toledo listening to the final innings of the game on the Westwood One national radio feed, slumping into the backseat of the car as the Red Sox laid blow after blow. Being a gracious guest, I didn't want to tell my girlfriend's dad, who was driving, that my ears were going to start

bleeding if he didn't change the station this instant. My girlfriend was sitting next to me, occasionally smiling at me, apparently oblivious to the fact that my heart was turning into a giant vat of Dog Chow before her very eyes.

Her dad noticed, though. "Man, you looked like you were about to die as that game was ending," he later told me.

No kidding. It's probably difficult for a Detroit fan who has actually experienced world championships in his lifetime to comprehend the pure, dysfunctional desperation of being a Cleveland fan. If you're a Detroit fan, your championship itch has been sufficiently scratched. But it goes deeper than that.

I consider Detroit to be an average sports town. Four teams, ranging from the chronically bad (Lions) to a quasi-dynasty (Red Wings). The Pistons are good every year, but don't have an embarrassment of riches to show for it. The Tigers won a pennant in 2006, but have regressed every year since.

The college scene features a Michigan Wolverines football program that has fallen definitively behind Ohio State in the Big Ten pecking order. Michigan State is the less-favored stepbrother, but Tom Izzo has still constructed a Spartan basketball powerhouse that won the 2000 National Championship.

Michigan and Detroit fans have experienced the good and the bad. They've won, but not so much that they've developed the sense of entitlement that you might find in Boston or New York. They've lost, but not so often and consistently that it would make them overly cynical.

I've attended Detroit sporting events as both friend and foe, dressing up in Red Wings colors to go to several hockey games at Joe Louis Arena and dressing up in my Tribe gear to go to an Indians-Tigers game at Comerica Park in 2006, where I was heckled and mocked on three or four separate occasions, including by a particularly persistent (I assume) drunk who spent more time screaming at me than watching the game.

All in all, I shouldn't be jealous of these guys. Detroit is the same type of town as Cleveland, only about twice the size. They have the same crumbling economy, the same deficient schools, the same abandoned buildings, the same pothole-riddled streets and the same idiot drunks at sporting events as Cleveland does. Both towns are pure rust belt, manufacturing towns that fell on hard times when

America's power center moved from brick-and-mortar factories to glass-and-steel skyscrapers.

But I am jealous of them. And I'm jealous of Pittsburgh. Both towns are first cousins with Cleveland, but unlike our fair city, they win enough sports titles so that sports doesn't affect the collective self-image of the people who live there. Detroiters and Pittsburghers might get down about the state of the economy in their cities and states, but you don't seem to find a lot of people from those towns who are ashamed to call their cities home.

In Cleveland, you find more of that. The can-do spirit of perseverance that you might find in another city is in much shorter supply here. Frustration has turned to depression, which then turns to apathy. Sports shouldn't have this much to do with collective self-image, but it does, especially in a town where sports has sparse competition for attention and money. In Cleveland, sports is the Great Uniter in good times, and the Great Demotivator in bad times.

No one needs to tell us what the climate is usually like. Pain spiked with short, fleeting bursts of superficial pleasure.

Anymore, we've become so dysfunctional as a fan base that it's not only about what we don't have. It's what other cities do have. Our misery is compounded when nearby cities populated by people we know get to celebrate while our championship drought inches further into its fifth decade.

It came home for me over the past weekend when my girlfriend's aunt and uncle came to Cleveland to visit her. One of the first things her aunt handed to us was a copy of the front page of the Detroit News, Red Wings Stanley Cup Parade Special Edition.

On the cover was a full page photo of red-clad Detroiters clamoring in the ecstatic parade pandemonium to get a look at the Stanley Cup. Even though it was the Wings' fourth title in 11 years, the enthusiasm for a championship never wanes.

Inside, quotes from people on the street: "This is great. Detroit needed some good news and we've finally gotten it."

On the back page, a car advertisement: "Congratulations Red Wings on a great end to a thrilling season."

In Cleveland, it's the kind of ending that only exists in storybooks and other cities.