

The Cleveland Experience - Part I

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}
Friday, July 17 2009 7:00 PM -

Steve Buffum is one of the more talented sports writers I've come across in my life.



(originally written May 2005)

My eight-year-old son has just become a baseball fan. This is a big deal, in that to this point, neither he nor his older brother has taken much interest in sports of any kind, and I've been a keen follower of sports of all kinds since I was quite young. I am grateful for the opportunity, and excited by the prospect.

Except for two things: my son has an extraordinarily low threshold for frustration. And I am a lifelong Cleveland fan.

This is not a good combination.

I moved to Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio with my family when I was three years

old when my Dad got a job with the Akron Beacon Journal; we moved to Akron proper the next year. My neighborhood was blessed with a number of small boys my age that lived on the same block as we did, so for most of my youth, it was unusual that there wasn't some sort of athletic event taking place somewhere in the neighborhood. Our house had the only vacant lot adjacent to the house, so our yard was a natural place to play Wiffle ball or Nerf football games. We had a lopsided basketball hoop nailed to the garage, but a gravel driveway, so the guys with paved driveways saw more home basketball action. On the other hand, my Dad threw the best Wiffle curve in the neighborhood and never asked to bat, so baseball games that didn't involve nine players, uniform shirts, or keeping accurate score were usually in my back yard. To the best of my knowledge, none of us ever went on to play even college sports, but any of us could have told you how many times any of the others had hit the ball over the house for a home run.

The early seventies were a challenging time to grow up a Cleveland sports fan, though. The Pittsburgh Steelers drafted Terry Bradshaw, and we got Mike Phipps. Bradshaw and the Steelers went on to win four Super Bowls, and we got to root for a guy named Turkey. Sam McDowell self-destructed and gave way to Gaylord Perry, who left to go be even more famous elsewhere. My original Indians team featured The Guy Who Got Run Over By Pete Rose, but my formative memory of the Indians was watching Graig Nettles and Chris Chambliss celebrate their World Series win ... as New York Yankees. We had two of the best corner infielders in the game, and if you can name three of the players they were traded for, you could probably write your own version of this essay. The expansion Cavaliers gave us Austin Carr, Bingo Smith's Afro (which competed with the Indians' Oscar Gamble's Afro), and the Miracle of Richfield, then turned into the franchise that forced the Commissioner to protect it from its owner, Ted Stepien. The Commissioner give us an extra first-round pick and passed a rule preventing future franchises from trading consecutive first-rounders because of Stepien's singular ineptitude. Cleveland managed to fold

both NHL and WHA franchises in the space of my elementary school career. (Admittedly, folding a WHA franchise did little to set Cleveland apart.)

What I didn't realize at the time was that this was not a "rough stretch." This was "The Cleveland Experience."

Chris was born in August of 1996 with a knot in his cord and a hyper efficient bowel that absorbed every possible nutrient from his food and precluded him from making a bowel movement for over a week at a time. Whereas the typical infant sleeps between 14 and 16 hours a day (albeit not consecutively), we were fortunate when Chris pushed the 8 hour mark. It wasn't enough to rock him when he woke up: he required pacing in the kitchen at a pretty good clip. He also was able to generate a sound that could only charitably be called "crying"; it much more closely resembled a wolverine trying to strangle Nina Hagen with a set of bagpipes. As he grew, we would keep a map of the places in town that would cut the hair of small children, and mark them off as he went to each one. We finally found a place with VCRs at each station that worked to distract him from the ignominy of cutting hair, but not before the one place where, while using a large percentage of my adult strength to restrain him in the chair, he turned plaintively to the other customers in the shop and begged, "Help me!" We didn't go back.

Chris was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Delay, or PDD, which is kind of like being told by a dermatologist that you have

"contact dermatitis." That means your skin itches and they don't know why. Ostensibly, your itchy skin is why you went in the first place, so this is not enlightening information. In Chris' case, it was a little more informative, as well as daunting: PDD is the non-specific catch-all diagnosis for being on the "autistic spectrum." Since then, the diagnosis has been refined to Asperger's Syndrome, which is accurate to a point: autistic spectrum disorders are less points on a line than points on a plane, or maybe in hyperspace. There's more than one axis, and although Chris displays behaviors that are consistent with a classical listing of those of Asperger's, he has some that aren't on the list and is missing some that are. It's not an exact science, and it's not even consistent every day.

One manifestation that is consistent, however, is that he has an incredibly difficult time in competitive situations. If he is playing a game and does not get the result he wants, he is mostly incapable of being able to control his frustration and negative impulses toward emotional outburst. Compounding this, he will perseverate on things, meaning in this case that he won't stop doing the thing that frustrates him, which causes an upward spiral that ultimately and inevitably explodes. He loves to play video games, and has developed a number of skills from playing them, but it can be nerve-wracking to hear from across the house that he's having trouble.

He got interested in the computer game "Backyard Baseball" after school where he stays after classes are over. If you're unfamiliar with this game, it features kids playing baseball, and the hook is that some of the kids are famous baseball players drawn as nine-year-olds. Ken Griffey, Jr. really is a "kid" in this game. Chris has told me a lot of the players: Derek Jeter, Jeff Bagwell, Cliff Floyd, Shawn Green, Randy Johnson ... for a while, he would ask if a guy was a real baseball player.

"Do you know Frank Thomas?" he asked.

"Yes," I'd say. "He plays for the Chicago White Sox."

"His nickname is 'The Big Hurt,'" he would inform me.

"It sure is," I would say, impressed. I did not tell him this.

"He is a very good pitcher," he tells me.

"Really?" I would ask. In "Backyard Baseball," the players are a lot more like the Little League players you played with where the best athlete probably pitched, played third base, and hit .650 or so. I have no trouble believing that a nine-year-old Frank Thomas was an excellent pitcher.

"I have him throw a right hook to the batters who stand on the left, but when they stand on the right, I have him throw a left hook," he tells me.

"Good strategy," I say. I am not ready to tell him that having Frank Thomas throw a left hook to the catcher, Ichiro, while Brad Radke is your second baseman would probably be considered thinking way, way out of the box in real baseball. I do not want to do anything that stifles his interest in baseball.

Especially if I am going to teach him to root for the Indians.

My family is originally from the Maryland side of suburban Washington, D.C. My maternal grandfather was a big Senators fan and a semi-pro catcher until he hurt his leg in an auto accident. He would regale me with stories of Ty Cobb and Walter Johnson and was such a charitable soul he didn't hate Calvin Griffith. After the Senators left, he transferred his allegiance to the Baltimore Orioles, and by the time I was a sentient baseball fan, I followed the Orioles along with him, aunts, uncles, and cousins. The Orioles were quite good, of course, with Jim Palmer, Dave McNally, the Robinsons, Boog Powell, Paul Blair, Mark Belanger, Bobby Grich, and a host of others. Even as they faded, they provided a legitimate alternative for Yankee-haters to Cleveland, which continued to stink. I got to watch both Frank Robinson and Boog Powell in the travestial all-red uniforms of the Indians when each was well past his prime, although I did see Powell steal second base in person. Since Powell at that point in his career was roughly as fast as a disinterested Galapagos tortoise, I can only attribute this occurrence to the fact that it's hard for the catcher to throw to second when he's doubled over with laughter.

Terry Pluto wrote what is probably the definitive work on rooting for the Indians, "The Curse of Rocky Colavito." In it, he sums up how players felt about playing in Cleveland by recounting the story that Brett Butler, our center fielder and arguably best player in the early '80s, refused to give the Indians' front office his phone number in the off season so they could not contact him to renew his contract. I still hold significant antipathy for Rick Sutcliffe, one of the bright spots, for bad-mouthing Cleveland on his way to his Cy Young season with the Chicago Cubs. The Chicago Cubs! They made the playoffs. Cleveland, not unexpectedly, did not.

I attended a three-game series against the Red Sox in April of 1985. It represented what I think is a fair microcosm of Indians Fandom at the time: our best pitcher, Bert Blyleven, lost the first game of the series due to poor run support pitching a pretty good game in 45-degree misty

The Cleveland Experience - Part I

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}
Friday, July 17 2009 7:00 PM -

fog in front of 6500 fans. The guys in front of us kept yelling, "Waterbury! Waterbury!" and "Maine! Maine!" at players like Chris Bando, naming the minor-league affiliates of the Indians at the time. We won the two other games of the series behind pitching long since forgotten, and a glimmer of hope found its way to the surface that maybe, just maybe, things would change and the Indians would really be in it for once.

How this hope even existed, I'm not sure. The next season, the Indians finished over .500 for the first time in many years, although well out of first place. They wouldn't do it again for nearly another decade.

Part II coming tomorrow!