

A Tale Of Two Cities

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Sunday, June 14 2009 7:00 PM -

Hear that sound echoing off the Appalachian hills to our east? That's the sound of celebrating, by a people near and not-so-dear to our hearts- Pittsburgh sports fans, once again achieving a level that we know only in black-and-white newsreels. And once again, the glare of their triumph illuminates the depths of our futility. Since 1970 Pittsburgh's teams have competed in seven Super Bowls, four Cup Finals, and two World Series, to two World Series and one NBA Finals for Cleveland's teams. Jesse talks about it in his latest piece.



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The Penguins won their third Stanley Cup on Friday night, downing the defending-champion Red Wings 2-1 at Joe Louis Arena, and they did it with style. Going into the Playoffs as the fourth seed in the Eastern Conference, Pittsburgh twice overcame two-game deficits and twice went on the road to win a Game Seven, maybe the toughest kind of game to win in all of sports. On their way to the Cup, the Penguins knocked off both the number-one contender to Sidney Crosby's title as best player in the NHL (Washington's Alex Ovechkin) and the team that defeated them in last year's Finals (Detroit.) Not just winning the Cup, but *how* they won it, had to be extremely satisfying to Pittsburgh fans.

Meanwhile, here we are in Cleveland, picking through the ruins of what might have been for the Cavaliers, and wondering when our turn will come- if it ever does come. Since the Cavaliers began play in the fall of 1970, making Cleveland a three-sport town to match Pittsburgh, Yinzer Ville has won eleven Championships- six for the Steelers, three for the Pens, and two for the Pirates.

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Cleveland, of course, has none. Since 1970 Pittsburgh's teams have competed in seven Super Bowls, four Cup Finals, and two World Series, to two World Series and one NBA Finals for Cleveland's teams. They've had more opportunities than we have, and they've cashed in accordingly.

Actually, of the urban areas with three teams or more in the big four sports, only Boston, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area have more Championships than Pittsburgh since 1970-71- and those cities all have more than three teams. In the last three-plus decades Pittsburgh, in a relative manner of speaking, has been the most successful sports town in the United States. I don't think I have to tell you what town has been the *least* successful.

Perhaps the unkindest cut is the similarities between C-Town and Steel Town. In a lot of ways, Pittsburgh is Cleveland's sports-town *doppelgänger*. Both cities are slavishly devoted to football above everything else. Both cities have baseball teams that have been around for more than a century, have found sporadic islands of success within vast oceans of futility, and are the property of compact but hard-core fan bases. Both cities have winter-sports teams with largely bandwagon fan bases and an adherence to the cult of the transcendent superstar. If familiarity breeds contempt, it's no wonder Cleveland and Pittsburgh get along so infamously. They are us, and we are them.

That's what makes Pittsburgh's sporting success so exasperating, especially in light of our futility. We look a hundred miles southwest and see a city just like ours, with fans sharing so many of the same tendencies, the same passions, the same identities- only they *have*, and we don't. It's like having a brother you don't particularly care for, the one you fight with at every family gathering- but who has everything you want and don't have. He has the late-model Lexus, the nice house on the hill, and eats at Ruth's Chris every week. You drive an '87 Yugo, live in Section 8 housing, and your diet is Top Ramen. He's Bill Clinton and you're Roger. He's Jose Canseco and you're Ozzie. He's Sly Stallone and you're Frank. He's Pittsburgh and you're Cleveland.

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Even in the one sport in which Cleveland has the advantage over Pittsburgh, they've been unable to drive home their superiority. Since the early '90s, the Indians have won seven American League Central Division Championships and two American League pennants, while the Pirates have worked on a string of sixteen (soon to be seventeen) consecutive losing seasons. In the last decade-and-a-half the Tribe has experienced success Pittsburgh's baseball fans can only dream of. But they haven't landed the ultimate in bragging rights- a World Championship. And in not taking that final step, we've only trumped the heartbreak that Pittsburgh's baseball fans have endured for years. We saw Francisco Cabrera and raised Jose Mesa. In a way, then, we haven't had more success on the baseball diamond- just a higher level of failure.

Normally, I'm not given to lamentation when it comes to the Cleveland Experience. I'm happy with my loyalties, and I wouldn't trade them for Pittsburgh's or anyone else's. To be a Cleveland fan is to be a part of the most unique fraternity in all of American sports, and I'm glad to be a part of it. I don't bemoan my fate and I don't wear it as a hair shirt. There's no point in that. There is enough in life to make a man miserable without making sports loyalties another cross to be borne.

But damn it would be nice, for once, if those sounds of triumph were coming from our lips to their ears. Maybe someday, huh?