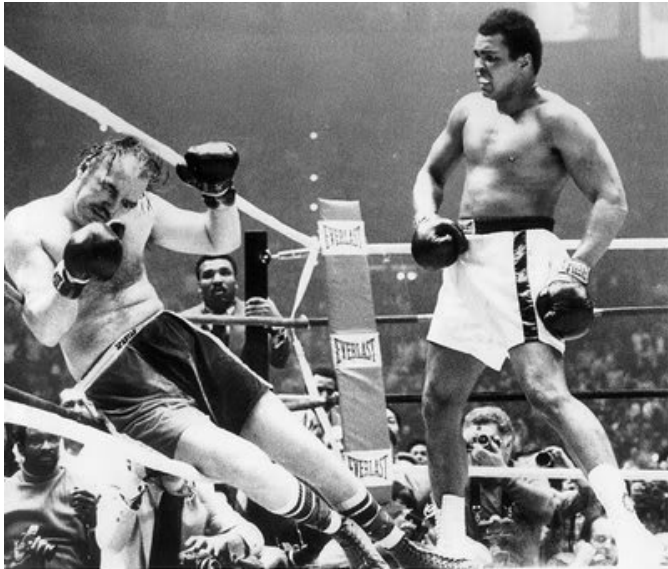


Brian McPeck is Chuck Wepner. Cleveland sports teams are Muhammad Ali. Handing out beatings to Pecker, who keeps answering the bell, only to take more punishment and lose a lot of blood in the process. In his latest, he talks about how the last ten years of Browns football and Indians baseball has sapped much of the joy from his sporting experience. And why the upcoming Cavaliers campaign has taken on added importance for him. A great read from Peeks.



I hate being the guy whose inability to digest the past and move on colors everything he does, thinks and writes when it comes to sports. As the late sportscaster and Browns sideline reporter Casey Coleman often said, "Sports is the candy store of life." Coleman meant that when everything is said and done, sports are entertainment and not life and death.

So I'm not going to go in depth regarding the last 45 years of sporting disappointments and wear them proudly as a martyr would or wave them around like some badge of courage. This isn't about that.

This is about the fact that right now I'm Chuck Wepner and Cleveland sports teams are Muhammad Ali. Perhaps equating Cleveland sports team with one of the greatest champions of all time in any sport is a bit misguided, but equating where I am right now in regard to my sports outlook to Chuck Wepner is dead nuts on.

Wepner, from New Jersey, was affectionately referred to as the 'Bayonne Bleeder'

given his proclivity for, well, getting cut frequently and easily and losing a lot of blood in the process. He was beaten up badly by everyone from Ali (though he did knock the champ down once) to George Foreman to Sonny Liston to some fighter named Jose King Roman. He needed 120 stitches to close the cuts inflicted upon him by Liston after Liston's 10th round knockout ended their fight.

But that was Wepner's way: to somehow answer the bell the majority of the time and go out and get his ass kicked by everyone from Jose King Roman to Muhammad Ali. Three minutes at a time, time and time again. Over the course of his career he was 35-14-2 and the guys who cleaned the canvas after the fights probably grew to hate him.

There are hemophiliacs who fed their hands into lathes who bled less than Chuck Wepner.

The point is, as the upcoming Cavaliers season is about to get started, I'm a bloody mess. I am Chuck Wepner. I've answered the bell year after year and yet as we sit here today I'm slumped on my stool in the corner of the ring and am having serious doubts about going back out there for another round. I'm tired of getting hit in the face. I'm tired of having body blows rain down on me. I'm tired of being beaten and outclassed by almost any opponent I face and I'm having a hell of a time convincing myself that I can take another punch.

That's why this Cavs season is so important to me. I need my faith restored and I need it now. I need my investment of time, tears, blood, sweat and emotion to pay off sooner rather than later. Because as it stands today I've never had less interest in talking, reading or watching sports. I'm no different (or didn't used to be) than many of you out there.

I could watch a meaningless May ESPN game between the Giants and the Padres until 1am. I could watch a Pepperdine-UCSB Monday night basketball game that tipped off at midnight. I looked forward to the late Saturday night college football game on FSN Ohio when September rolled around regardless of who was playing it. Hell, I spent many a Saturday afternoon watching the Ivy League Game of the Week with play-by-play from ex-Indians TV broadcaster Jack Corrigan.

I was in Ivy League/Jack Corrigan deep.

Then I could wake up the next day and talk about those games or converse electronically with many other sports fiends on TCF message boards. Not too many people ran up message board posts with the alarming frequency I did. It was an impressive pace if I say so myself.

But I don't have the stomach for it anymore. Not to the extent I once did. I'll still watch most sporting events because sports are better drama than most network programs. I'll still throw a post in a message board thread on occasion. But when I'm watching I'm watching passively and when I'm posting any more it's almost half-heartedly.

The last ten years of Browns football and Indians baseball has sapped much of the joy from the sporting experience. And it's not the losing as much as it is the complete lack of faith I currently have that those teams will figure out how to win. I could handle the regular rebuilding periods that small market baseball teams are forced to endure. I could handle the two or three year periods of mediocrity that NFL teams occasionally go through. What has me completely beaten down is that the Indians

and Browns seem to be in a perpetual state of suck and blow and show no signs of figuring things out any time soon. Throw in what looks to be the failed (or at least severely stalled) development of Terrelle Pryor in a down season in Columbus and the collapse of the sports psyche is complete.

It's not whining either. At least it's not meant to be. Maybe it's maturing (or at least aging) and having priorities change or maybe it is getting kicked in the stones repeatedly. Maybe it's a natural defense mechanism that's kicking in to shield the mind from further torment. Hell, maybe it is whining. I don't know.

But the upcoming Cavaliers campaign has taken on added importance for me. The Cavs are a franchise with a legitimate chance of bringing a championship to this town and this is a year, arguably more so than any other year in franchise history, that they are built to take on all comers in an attempt to end the title drought in this town.

In the off season they got bigger on the blocks and more athletic on the wings. They have two of the top players in NBA history if you put LeBron in that company right now, as I do. They're hungry, they're talented and they have the best player in the game surrounded by a strong, experienced supporting cast.

I don't believe in karma, jinxes and being 'due'. I believe in talent, health and hunger. The Cavs have two of the necessary three components to winning a title and there's not much they can do once the season starts regarding injuries (aside from Coach Mike Brown responsibly managing

minutes). They're built to win now. I'd feel much better about sports and life if they'd take care of business and get it done this year. I don't need to see 66 regular season wins or sweeps on the first two playoff rounds (though I'd take that all again).

I need to see LBJ hugging the Larry O'Brien Championship Trophy, Shaq with a big-ass cigar in his mouth which he wags occasionally when Kobe's name is mentioned, Mo and Delonte soaked in champagne and dancing and laughing as they completely drench Anderson Varejao, Z sitting semi-stoically in the clubhouse with ice on his knees attempting to keep the tears and emotion of the past 11 years bottled up for a few more moments until the cameras leave and owner Dan Gilbert with a big crap-eating grin telling anyone who will listen that this is what Cavs fans can expect year in and year out as long as he owns the team.

Salvation and my faith restored. That's what I'm looking for. Come on Cavs. Gotta make it happen.

I need it.

We all need it.

Pick Wepner up off the mat.