



We're better in Cleveland. At least we think we are.

No, not the city itself. We're firmly second-rate in our own minds. But when it comes to rooting for our sports teams, nobody can tell us that we're anything but number one.

No fan base has had so little to show for so much loyalty and passion over the years. We stick with our teams like glue, we develop static-cling emotional attachment, we debate on message boards, we read volumes of fact, opinion and stats, we allow anyone who is willing and able-bodied to take a crack at being our Moses, whether it be LeBron James or Charlie Frye.

We defended Albert Belle when the rest of the country hated his thermostat-bashing, trick-or-treater chasing butt. Through voice and volume, we intimidated the NFL into making a replacement franchise for Cleveland a priority.

And despite it all, we've received no championships for our trouble. No lasting moment in the Sun. Just a lot of betrayal and cruel jokes at our expense. And if the outlook for this town's sports teams is as universally bleak as it appears to be, we aren't going to have that itch scratched anytime soon.

At this point, you kind of have to assume that the next legitimate contender in this town might be five years away or more. The Browns, because of the NFL's built-in parity rules, stand the greatest chance of reaching contention first, but regardless of who is running the show, that franchise always seems to make five bad moves for every good move.

The Indians are financially overmatched, with an alienated fan base that might not fill Progressive Field even if the team gets off to a hot start one of these years. Look to the case study of the 2007 season for proof.

The Cavs aren't winning anything until they find another LeBron. Enough said.

Three teams, and nothing but flat prairie (or scorched desert, depending on your outlook) as far

as the eye can see. And absolutely no promise that what is over the horizon will be any better.

At some point, even the most steadfast Cleveland fans -- the ones who will proudly wear a 2003 Kelly Holcomb jersey through downtown Pittsburgh as an act of pure defiance -- might start to ask their inner selves if there is a point to it all.

You'd be excused if you did want to ask that question. Going to bed on Sunday with a rope of pain looping your scalp from temple to temple, the result of an evening of quiet seething over another Browns loss -- and the alcohol that probably accompanied it. The mind-numbing college lecture that every Indians season seems to become. The knowledge that LeBron almost certainly quit on the Cavs last spring, knowing full well that he was paving his way out of Cleveland.

And yet, we come back for more, year after year. We fall madly in love with any Cleveland team that shows even a glimmer of potential as a title winner. We're that desperate. We'll suffer to no end, hoping for that final championship-parade payoff.

Not only that, we wrap ourselves in a cloak of righteousness as we suffer. We're dedicated. We're not like those fair-weather fans in Miami. We're not a city of transplants like Atlanta, Phoenix or Tampa. We were born and raised here. Our fandom was passed down from our fathers and grandfathers. We live and breathe the very essence of our teams. We sacrifice and bleed for them. We identify with them on a DNA-structural level. They are us. We are them.

To which Miami fans answer: "That's nice. You do that. We're going to go watch LeBron and the Heat win by 30, then we're going to the beach."

Those so-called fair weather fans in the Sun Belt? They pick sports up and put it down whenever it suits them. We look down our noses at a fan base that doesn't even think about the Marlins until they're in the NLCS. We're appalled that such lax fan support is rewarded with two World Series titles in the span of six years. Then, Miami was rewarded with an NBA title in 2006, and chances are very good they have more Heat parades coming.

All for a fan base that, save for the Dolphins and maybe the University of Miami football program, really doesn't cling to sports in any meaningful way.

But maybe Miami has it right. Maybe they do deserve the titles they've won because they approach sports in the right frame of mind. They put sports in its frivolous place. They don't look to local sports teams for regional or personal vindication, or to provide a metaphorical sword of justice to wield when assailed by fans of a rival team.

Yes, Miami has beaches, warm weather and points of civic pride that Cleveland quite obviously doesn't have. But it's a state of mind more than anything else.

The fans in Miami and across the Sun Belt know what we in Cleveland refuse to admit: there is no honor in suffering for a sports team. To emotionally martyr yourself, week after week, month after month, coming back for more time and time again, it's about as futile as trying to get

anywhere by running on a hamster wheel.

Cleveland has, quite possibly, the most unhealthy fan/team relationship of any major U.S. city. It's a clingy, needy, desperate, one-sided relationship in which the fans keep giving and giving of themselves, in the hope that the love will be requited in the form of that long-sought championship parade that seemingly every U.S. city has experienced in the past half-century except for Cleveland. But the teams always let us down, without fail, and it creates even more emotional baggage.

I've seen the cycle of abuse play out since the days of The Drive and The Fumble, and those older than me have even earlier examples.

Instead of mocking Miami, Tampa and Atlanta, maybe we should strive to be more like them. We should care less about sports in Cleveland. That doesn't mean we stop supporting the local teams, but as a source of joy and misery, the grown men who play games for millions of dollars a year should be far down the list of what moves us.

If for no other reason, change your outlook to achieve this: when a Steelers fan tries to give you the business about the Browns' latest calamity, you can say something like, "Oh, really? I didn't see it. I was at the park with my family on a beautiful fall day."

That is a liberating feeling.