As compelling as Sunday's Super Bowl ended up being, I never lost the sense, not even for a moment, that I'd be conflicted No matter who ever would end up winning. Would it be Baltimore, the city that played a desperate doddering old man like Art Modell like a Spanish guitar as they stole what wasn't theirs because someone stole what was, or the San Francisco 49ers a team led by a former Michigan quarterback?

In the end, I rooted, and hard, for the 49ers because the Ohio State connections outweighed or at least cancelled out the Michigan influence. Mostly, though I rooted for San Francisco because Ray Lewis is a douche.

Let's be clear on this point. I didn't actually care who won and I wasn't even so much rooting against Lewis and his team winning as much as I was just so sick of everything Ray Lewis that as usual he made it easy to pick against his team.

The convenient lazy postscript is that Lewis ended up being one of a handful of players who compiled a storied career and ended up going out on top. Know this much. Lewis had a storied career and Lewis' last game resulted in a Super Bowl victory for his team. But that will never mean that Lewis leaves as a winner. If there was one shining moment in an otherwise dismal outcome for the team I wanted it was watching Lewis get pushed around like the paperweight he'd become. Believe me when I tell you this, there isn't one person in the Baltimore Ravens organization, from owner Steve Bisciotti to Ozzie Newsome to the ball boys (who may or may not be led by Eric Mangini as he tries to resurrect a career he sabotaged) who if you got a few

Scotches in them wouldn't admit that he's glad Lewis and the circus are leaving town.

At best Lewis a distraction. At most he's a shadow presence who played long past his expiration date. The problem is that the team couldn't afford to bench Lewis because as the self-appointed heart and soul of the team Lewis put himself (cleverly, I'll give him that) in a no-touch position. So now John Harbaugh and company no longer have to concern themselves with the Ray Lewis problem. They can actually put someone in there that is competent.

Lewis evokes that visceral reaction in everyone not associated with the Baltimore franchise. Watching the game and all its festivities made me realize once again what an insufferable prick Lewis really is. From the bizarre pre-game interview he gave to Shannon Sharpe, and interview in which he said that he can't be the guy people think (i.e. an accessory to double murder) because God wouldn't allow him to do so much good if he was such a bad guy, to the heavy eye black makeup that passed useful about two exits ago, Lewis is not the embodiment of what the NFL should be pushing forward but a sad, pathetic example of what the NFL has become, a sport that rails against bad actors publicly but rewards them privately.

Lewis is a poser and there are a whole generation of posers just in the NFL that got their start because they saw Mr. Ray act like an asshole while the cameras rolled during the pre-game huddle that essentially featured Lewis chanting incoherently while seemingly whipping himself into a reality-camera induced frenzy. It was always just an act.

But being a poser is hardly an egregious sin these days. In his case, save it for the abject phoniness that is all things Lewis. In his later years he became a self-described man of Christ who seems to have missed a few of the lessons along the way, busy as he was siring six illegitimate children with four different women. Then there was that whole little incident Lewis tries to so blithely shush away involving a double murder. There are plenty of articles around the internets about it so no need to recap it except to note that Lewis eventually plea bargained his involvement down to obstruction of justice, weirdly escaping prison, and then paid hefty private settlements to the families of the two slain men. No one accused Lewis of actually sticking the knife in the two victims with whom he and his posse fought but he was there, his white blood stained suit mysteriously disappeared and there was blood in his limousine. No wonder he settled.

Lewis is likely a Hall of Famer, probably first ballot. He certainly has an impressive playing resume from his early days and he's been living off that for at least the last 5 years, probably

longer. But he probably did enough in his first 10 years to warrant his enshrinement mainly because when it comes to getting elected to the Hall of Fame it's one thing to be involved in double murder and obstruction of justice aren't nearly the barriers to entry as moving a franchise has proven to be.

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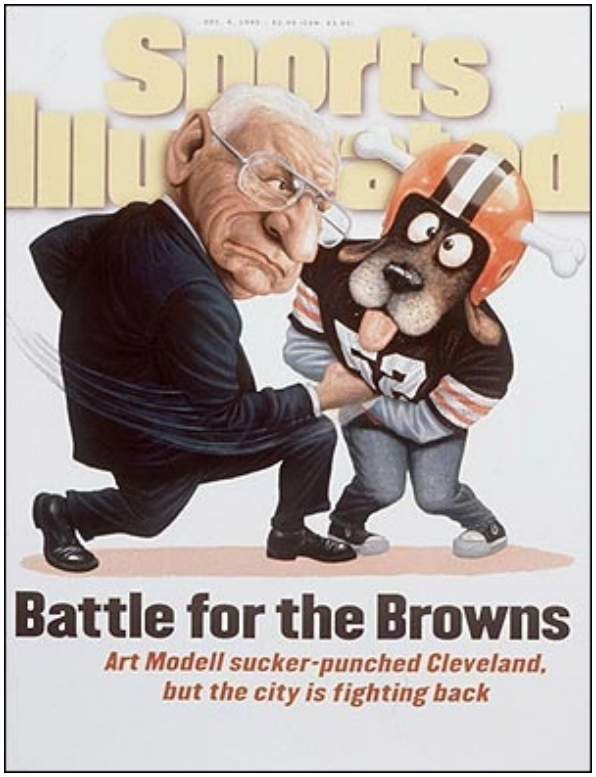

Speaking of vainglorious jackasses that moved franchises, it was good to see that the Hall of Fame electors chose to kick Art Modell's candidacy to the curb once again. I suspect you won't see Art reconsidered until the senior committee lets him in a decade or two from now as an overlooked great of the game.

As with Lewis there's no need to recount all of Art's transgressions to make the point about why he doesn't deserve football's ultimate honor, not now not ever. That's what the internets are for. But the fact that the Baltimore media keep pushing his candidacy is both appalling and a marker for why sports journalism has become a nearly worthless endeavor.

Bill Simmons, writing on his Grantland website, gave a startling confessional about the dichotomy between writing what he really feels and writing what is politically correct. It's what's

kept him from calling out in more forceful terms the cheaters that overwhelm all our sports and instead marveling in their artificially enhanced endeavors. And as Simmons notes, he's not alone. There's a whole profession dedicated to doing pretty much the same thing so as to not risk its access.

It's that same mentality that pushes the sycophantic writers in Baltimore to keep pushing Modell for the Hall of Fame. It keeps them on the inside. That they have to change facts isn't even an issue. Fox News has built an entire network on the concept that facts are debatable. Besides, they don't want to deal in facts so much as appease an audience that doesn't want to hear anything negative about the scumbag that screwed an entire city. I have no doubt that these same hacks using the exact same motivation would lead the charge to deny Bob Irsay enshrinement into the Hall of Fame if he was ever a serious candidate. Irsay bad, Modell good.

Guys like Modell don't deserve to be held up as paragons of virtue. He was anything but. His life at best was a set of competing narratives. There was the good/funny Art, the guy who supported charities and such when the cameras rolled and there was a fundraiser to attend. There was the bad/deceitful Art that lied about moving the Browns and screwed his business partners. The Hall of Fame isn't for the good/funny kind who donate to charity. Ray Lewis can lay claim to charitable works but I can guarantee you that no one will feel a need to base the decision to put him in the Hall of Fame simply because he found a way to shield income by establishing a Foundation that gave some money to some kids in need. It's what Lewis accomplished on the field that will make or break his candidacy and so it is with Modell as well. Modell was a loser of the first order in Cleveland. All he did was run off good coaches, make one bad football decision after another, screw the city that flowed millions his way, robbed the fans of a team they blindly supported his follies, all while compiling a record that never did result in a Super Bowl victory until he moved the franchise and for once put it in the hands of those far more competent. The day that qualifies for a bust in the main wing of the Hall of Fame is the day they should shut it down permanently.

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As it does every year about this time, well, for the last 42 years anyway, the Browns latest bunch of brass is regrouping and trying to figure out how to close the gap between themselves and this year's Super Bowl champ.

They have their work cut out for them.

On defense I hesitate to say but say anyway that the teams aren't all that far apart. The Browns have no one who could quite match Ngata, either in temperament or accomplishment, or Ed Reed. And while those are two are a very big presence, the rest of Baltimore's defense was shaky at best. You could see that on Sunday, particularly when Ngata left the game.

It's offense where the Browns have miles to go before they sleep, miles to go before they sleep. Joe Flacco was shaky this past season and then suddenly the switch went on. He played well the last month of the season but really you could actually see the difference starting with the second half of the New England playoff game. Flacco was struggling and so were the Ravens. Then Flacco put it together, his passes suddenly got crisp and he became a real leader. That carried into the Super Bowl. It helps that the Ravens offensive line is solid as are their running backs and receivers but ultimately Flaccos was the difference.

Contrast that with the Browns and you can easily understand why owner Jimmy Haslam already announced that Brandon Wheeden will face competition. Haslam learned early on that this is a quarterback-centric league and the sooner the Browns find a good one who isn't a 30-year-old sophomore the sooner they'll really begin to close the gap.

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With the news this past week that Travis Hafner wrestled a million or so dollars out of the Yankees despite an irrefutable track record that says he won't play in even half of the games, this week's question to ponder is who will have a better record at season's end, the Indians or the Yankees?