Steroids leading the sports news? Go figure. Between Barry Bonds recently breaking the hallowed MLB home run mark and the Browns Ryan Tucker getting suspended for the first four games of the NFL season ... the juice has been in the headlines alot as of late. And the always observant Gary Benz sees some strange inconsistencies in how fans view baseball players and football players that have been found guilty of using performance enhancing drugs.

For however long Barry Bonds plays baseball and perhaps forevermore, steroids and baseball will go together like pizza and cheese. And if that's how it must be then so be it. But just as any baseball record related to hitting and set during the so-called steroids era will always be suspect in most fans minds, it also beg a rather interesting question as to why those same fans shrug when it comes to steroids and other sports, particularly pro football.

For proof, look no further than the news that Cleveland Browns starting offensive lineman Ryan Tucker tested positive for the euphemistic "banned substance" late last week. It caused a bit of a ripple locally but was a complete non-story nationally. And the local ripple was due not to the fact that Tucker tested positive for steroids but more for the fact that the line will be that much thinner for the first four games of the season, a sort of "it figures" resignation from the local fans.

The reason steroid use by pro football players isn't as big of a story is likely related to two key factors. First, football got out ahead of the issue and without any acrimony. It has been random drug-testing players since 1987. Baseball, on the other hand, pretty much had to be bludgeoned into a credible testing policy by Congress, a policy that only went into effect at the beginning of the 2005 season. To most fans, starting testing in 2005 was mostly a case of closing the barn door long after the horses, in the persons of Bonds, Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa, among many others, had left the stable.

Second, while football has literally had scores of players who have tested positive since 1987, most have been offensive or defensive linemen and the occasional linebacker, none particularly high profile, save for Shawne Merriman last season. Moreover, because of the types of players involved, like Ryan Tucker, there is at least an understanding, if not an expectation, that these players need to bulk up. It's part of their job description.

Though baseball hasn't caught anybody of note in the two years it has been testing, unlike football some of it's highest profile players have nonetheless been implicated including Jose Canseco, Jason Giambi, Gary Sheffield and the aforementioned Bonds, McGwire and Sosa. And these aren't just mere implications either.

Canseco has been extremely forthcoming about his use, even if it was for profit. Giambi seems to have been tortured by his use and his admissions have come slowly and begrudgingly, but surely nonetheless. Sheffield is an admitted user, though he claims it was unintentional. McGwire got out of the game before he could be tested and then refused to answer any questions about his past while testifying before Congress, thus raising suspicions in the minds of those who were previously uncertain and confirming for those who figured as much anyway. Sosa took a sabbatical from the game as the spotlight got hotter, even claiming a sudden loss of his command of the English language in front of Congress to avoid answering tough questions. In the process, Sosa and his inflated head became a national joke. When he did come back to baseball a few years later he was literally half the man he was before he left. Bonds, like Sheffield, has copped to the unintentional use of the "clear and the cream."

But it's not just the implication of high profile players that has fans in knots; it's the association of those players with some of the most sacred records in all of baseball, home run records that has fostered the deep dissatisfaction. When it comes to these records, fans are incredibly protective. For years, Roger Maris' 61 home runs in 1961 was a record with an asterisk because he set the record in a season that was eight games longer than when Ruth set the record in 1927. Though no such asterisk has ever accompanied Hank Aaron's setting of the career home run mark, he was nonetheless subject to racist death threats as he

was closing in on Babe Ruth's career mark of 714 home runs. That's a pretty volatile environment and these involved players who were never suspected of cheating.

At the time McGwire and Sosa were engaging in their chase of Roger Maris' single season home run record (which both broke), it was a feel-good story after a contentious strike and performance-enhancing drugs were not really part of the conversation. But the revelations since have clearly tarnished fans' memories of both players as well as that season, to the extent that they even think about that season at all anymore. By 2001 when Bonds reset the mark with 73, steroids were being openly whispered about but Bonds also had other problems, mostly related to a cranky personality that made him only slightly more fan friendly than Hitler. As the whispers about Bonds grew louder, the fans became even more suspicious and disdainful, except of course for the Pollyannaish fans in the Bay Area. Even as he sits on the precipice of the most cherished record of all, he'll never escape the cloud.

In this context, it's no wonder that baseball suffers from such a sordid reputation with steroids while football has mostly been given a pass. This is unfortunate.

It may be true that in football, the players involved in steroids aren't themselves breaking any records, sacred or otherwise. But it's also true that a steroid-enhanced player is probably helping contribute to the achievements of a team's skill players who are breaking records, which in some fashion makes those records suspect. But fans aren't apt to make such connections and until a high profile skill player, say a Peyton Manning, Tom Brady or LaDanian Tomlinson is linked with steroids, football fans are never going to see the impact steroid use has in football like they do in baseball.

Instead, what you will continue to see is the general indifference on display in the case of Tucker. To his credit, Tucker hasn't torn a page from the Sheffield/Bonds playbook and claimed any sort of unintentional use. He's been pretty forthcoming, actually. But the fact that he used and is now suspended was not the kind of

distraction that the Browns needed in what is shaping up to be a make or break year for the franchise.

Tucker, like the many other football players who have come before him, will pay the price of their use through a suspension. But when it's over, it will mostly be forgotten. Heck, fans and players alike were so forgiving in the case of Merriman, he made the Pro Bowl last year despite his four-game suspension. The NFL may have instituted the "Merriman" rule to keep that from happening again, but the truth is that when it comes to steroids in football, fans aren't holding players to the same standards being applied to Bonds and his cohorts. In the end, this is why, despite the fact that football has had its program in place for so long, players continue to get caught and steroid use continues to plague the NFL just as much as it does baseball. And, like they do with football, it's time for football fans to hold the players and the league more accountable. After all, only the credibility and the integrity of the league are at stake, if that means anything anymore.