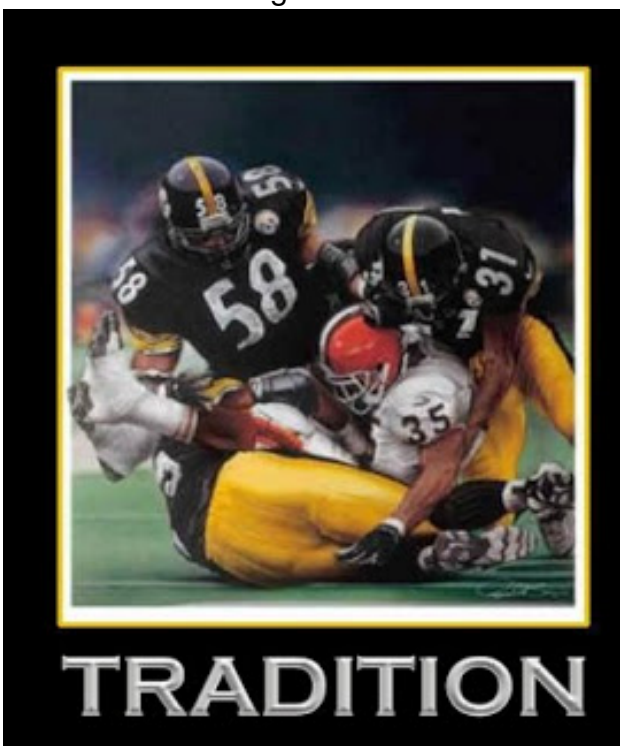
The Steelers are without a doubt the second-most-popular pro football team in the Cleveland area. And because they win all the time, their fans aren't bashful about flaunting their black and gold on shirts, jackets, hats, bumper stickers, flags, yard signs -- you name it. In Erik's latest, he takes the contrarion view to most of us, who will be cheering hard for the Cards. Erik says, if anything, we should welcome further success by the Steelers instead of resisting it. Resistance is futile, anyway, and it won't make the Browns any better.



What defines a Browns fan in this day and age?

No secret, there isn't a whole heck of a lot on which to hang your hat.

You can re-live the glory days of the past, whether your frame of reference is Paul Brown as a football innovator, Jim Brown as an unstoppable rushing force, Brian Sipe
and the
Kardiac
Kids or Bernie
Kosar
and those oh-so-close days of the late 1980s.

You can continue to examine the poorly-healed wound left by Art Modell's departure, seething with every morsel of success the Baltimore Ravens attain.

You can find solace in knowing the every other Browns fan has trudged through the past decade with you, following the sorry fortunes of this facsimile second franchise, bearers of an unrevived legacy.

You can do some of that. You can do all of that. But you still won't have reached the one true-essence common denominator that defines a 21st Century Browns fan. To do that, you have to hate the Steelers.

How can you not? Even if you didn't want to hate the Steelers, you don't really have much of a choice.
Steelers
fans, true-blue, bandwagon or otherwise, populate northeast Ohio in droves. The scourge from the southeast is without question a powerful football force in Browns country.

The Steelers are without a doubt the second-most-popular pro football team in the Cleveland area. And because they win all the time, their fans aren't bashful about flaunting their black and gold on shirts, jackets, hats, bumper stickers, flags, yard signs -- you name it.

Now, before the Sun has faded the "Pittsburgh Steelers Super Bowl XL Champions" bumper stickers applied to so many vehicles throughout the region several years ago, the
Steelers
will likely give their fans the chance to apply a "Super Bowl
XLIII
Champions" sticker right over the top. It's all about staying current, after all.

Browns fans? They might discreetly place a small orange helmet on the back window of their cars. They might have a t-shirt they wear once in a while, maybe a Tim Couch jersey bought during the ancient history of the Carmen Policy years. Maybe you break out the brown and orange on Autumn Sundays, but you probably don't wear it around town 365 days a year like Pittsburgh fans.

Steelers fans are proud. Browns fans want to be proud, but more and more, treat their football loyalty like something of a dirty little secret -- particularly if family gatherings involve Steeler fans. It's kind of like admitting that you sing along to "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go" by "Wham!" in the shower. The embarrassment potential is unbearable.

If you're a Browns fan, then you are the fan of a perpetual loser of a team sharing space with the fans of a five-time, likely soon to be six-time, Super Bowl championship team that lives less than two hours away and has the fans in your

neighborhood to prove it. Resentment is inevitable. Outright hatred is probable.

But should it be anymore? Should you view Steeler-hate as your civic duty as a Browns fan?

Over the past 40 years, the Steelers have been far more successful than the Browns. Since the new Browns franchise began play, the discrepancy has become even more pronounced. Head-to-head, the Browns have beaten the Steelers just three times since 1999, and are winless since 2003. Since then, the Browns have managed a fluke of a 10-6 season, three 4-win seasons and no playoff berths while Pittsburgh has multiple Super Bowl appearances.

It's almost as if the Steelers and Browns are playing in separate leagues. Their success is so incomprehensible to our frame of reference as Browns fans, it's almost ridiculous to get jealous. If the Steelers win their sixth Super Bowl, get angry at Bill Gates the next time he makes a couple billion, whenever that is.

If anything, you should welcome further success by the Steelers instead of resisting it. Resistance is futile, anyway, and it won't make the Browns any better.

Why should you do something as dastardly as not hate the Steelers with every fiber of your being? Because Randy Lerner and his minions du jour should see the damage they're doing to a once-great rivalry. The most powerful statement that can be handed to Browns management is a city slowly being taken over by the team next door, while the fans of the home team have their once-burning passion eroded into apathy, even something of a sense of respect for what the Steelers have accomplished over the past four decades.

It will be a dark day for Browns fans everywhere when we collectively pronounce the rivalry with the Steelers dead. But it's already on life support. The Steelers and their fans consider the Ravens their top rival in the division, and they're right.

Those in the Browns organization don't even recognize the rivalry on their own, largely because every presidential election since 2000 has occurred with the Browns under new management.

The only group keeping the Browns-Steelers rivalry torch lit is Browns fans, and maybe we need to extinguish it as a symbolic marking of the divergent paths of the two franchises. It can always be re-lit at a later date, but the arrival of that date could be measured in geologic time.

Maybe those in charge of the Browns are dense and/or oblivious and/or incompetent enough to not realize what they're ruining. But as the Steelers ready themselves for a shot at one for the other thumb while the Browns continue to wallow in last place with quicksand for an organizational foundation, it's hard to not see the handwriting on the wall, even for Randy Lerner: The Steelers are now; the Browns are so 50 years ago.

Last week, the Browns lost another link to their past with the death of Dante Lavelli. But more links to the past are dying as well, as the losing seasons mount and the distance between the present and the glory days grows ever wider. Nothing seems capable of stopping the separation between the current Browns and everything that made this franchise meaningful in the 20th Century.

So let's call it what it is. Choke on the words, but spit them out: The Steelers are the good guys. They're a quality organization with good ownership and solid executives. They deserve success because they have earned it. The Browns are the bad guys. They're the team that ruins careers, is frequently marred by infighting, can't keep a leadership team in charge for more than four years and is killing what was once a great rivalry.

This coming Sunday, there is a good chance the chasm between the two teams will only widen.