If anybody was still watching at the conclusion of the Browns preseason game on Saturday, they likely would have heard a deep, good-natured voice come over the speakers as the credits rolled:

"This Browns-Lions game was filmed before a live studio audience."

I certainly don't want to jeer a relatively solid performance by our boys, but to deliberately have the two teams with the worst long-term reputations in the NFL match up in the preseason each August is bound to evoke comparisons with mediocre sitcoms of the 1980s – if not for the humor delivered by these Browns-Lions games, then certainly by their comforting predictability.

While things are looking decidedly up for these Lake Erie brethren these days (and by "up," I mean 5-11 is within reach), they're still a long way from shrugging off the cavalcade of bad jokes and actually garnering respectability off the field.

Think the Browns have had it bad? On a rare trip to the playoffs in the mid-1990s, the Lions scored 37 points in a wild card game – and still somehow lost by three touchdowns. Just as the Browns had a breakthrough, "mirage" season in 2007, so too did the Lions: they went 7-9 – the only time this decade they lost less than 10 games in a season. Best of all, this year marks the 10th anniversary of the Lions' most recent winning season (rumor is they'll be wearing commemorative patches on their jerseys).

Let's also not forget that Detroit's 21st century legacy doesn't include a duly designated "expansion" period and that there was that little 0-16 baby in there – which, believe it or not, actually wasn't the first time the Lions have played an entire season without winning a game.

Like the Browns, the Lions have four NFL championships in their dusty old trophy case. But since their 59-14 pimp-slapping of the Browns in the 1957 NFL Championship Game, the Lions have reached the postseason only nine times – that's an average of once every six seasons – and have won a grand total of one postseason game over a 52-year span. Putting it in perspective, in his entire life, Kevin Bacon has seen the Detroit Lions win once in the playoffs.

Heartbreaking as the 1980s may have been for Browns fans, would you trade your memories of Brian Sipe for Eric Hipple? How about Bernie Kosar for Chuck Long? The one time the Lions legitimately made the postseason in that decade (1983), they blew a fourth-quarter lead at Candlestick Park and lost to the 49ers by one point when they missed a field goal on the final play of the game. And while the Browns may have broken our hearts in the holy trinity of the Dog Pound years – 1986 (12-4), 1987 (10-5), 1988 (10-6) – in those same three seasons, Detroit went 5-11, 4-11, and 4-12. Anybody want to bitch about John Elway right now?

It's hard to believe (and by "hard," I mean "utterly impossible") that Browns-Lions was once the greatest rivalry in the NFL. The Browns and Lions cracked leather helmets for the league championship three straight seasons and four times in a seven-year period in the 1950s. Otto Graham and Bobby Layne were the Peyton Manning and Brett Favre of their time, as the Lions and Browns boasted the two most innovative and impressive offenses of the era. (Insert Tim Couch and Joey Harrington jokes here.)

Put simply, as a Cleveland fan, how can you not root for Detroit just a little bit, deep down? Not necessarily across the board (the "Bad Boys" Pistons of the late 1980s, for example, can kiss my grits), but it's as if a giant mirror has been installed along the horizon, and when we look out over the lake at Detroit, we actually see ourselves: many of the same socioeconomic problems, identical stinky perceptions in the rest of the country, and a rich football tradition that gets vomited upon like a frat house welcome mat each and every autumn.

Much is made of Cleveland and Pittsburgh being of very similar makeup. While true, the city's sports destinies veer in dramatically opposite directions around 1970 – Pittsburgh winning 11

world titles since then, Cleveland zip. Whereas, Detroit's sports slump is much more in tune with Cleveland's. Granted, the Red Wings are the Tony Soprano of the NHL and the Tigers snuck a couple of World Series in there, but the Lions and Browns are essentially twin red-headed stepchildren separated at birth and then severely beaten in the same fashion in separate homes miles apart.

The Lions' best running back in franchise history just shrugged his shoulders one August and said 'Naw, that's okay,' rather than putting on the shoulder pads to continue a career in its prime. So did ours. Milt Plum and Gary Danielson were two of the best quarterbacks they've ever had. Us, too. Hell, the Detroit Lions actually have Ohio roots – they started in 1930 as the Portsmouth Spartans and had a better four-year stretch in Scioto County than they've enjoyed at any time in Detroit since JFK wasn't elected.

Remember how much fun it was watching Barry Sanders carry Detroit to a 12-4 record, the division title, and the NFC Championship Game in 1991 – beating the piss out of Jimmy Johnson's up-and-coming Cowboys in a divisional playoff along the way? How awesome would it be to someday see both the Browns and Lions rise to the top of the NFL elite at the same time? How about an all-Lake Erie Super Bowl? There's a natural rivalry between these two cities, of course, one that could rise to a fever pitch if our football teams ever got their respective acts together at the same time. Maybe the American Midwest could finally become a showcase for something other than soaring unemployment rates and bratwurst.

Did we see anything on either side on Saturday that suggests that a return to the days of Potsie and Ralph Malph is just around the corner? Aside from a mutual celebration of mere on-field competence, I don't think so. But if nothing else, these little August hootenannies with the Lions help remind us not necessarily of how bad things are for the Browns or how far they have to go.

They remind us that no matter how much we're hurting, we're not in this alone.