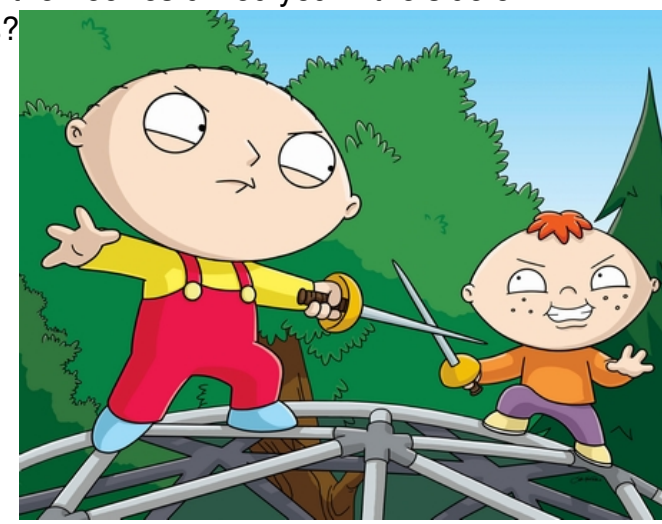
Remember that time in fourth grade when the doofus with the freckles drilled you in the side of the head during a heated game of dodgeball in gym class?



Sure you do. For the next five minutes, that guy was the bane of your existence, representing everything you despised in life. Your fingers ached for one of the overinflated large red rubber balls so you could enact swift revenge.

In those five minutes, nothing mattered more in the world than beaning that donkey in the coconut and making sure he knew that you were the one who clobbered him.

Of course, all these years later, that moment in fourth-grade gym is so distant it's almost as if it didn't happen at all. What the hell was that kid's name anyway?

This is not unlike the Browns' once-meaningful, now-insignificant relationship with the San Francisco 49ers, which will be renewed Sunday afternoon.

Over their 60-plus years of existence, the Browns have struck up a handful of rivalries - some natural, others perverted and weird - with a myriad of teams, with many of these grudges enduring more than half a century to survive to this day.

But their very first rivalry - the initial adversarial relationship the Browns ever had with another team - has faded away like the morning dew that coats our frosty lawns these autumn mornings.

Believe it or not, for the Browns, the freckled dork in gym class was the San Francisco 49ers.

The 49ers? Really? Not the Steelers or Giants or even the Lions?

Nope. The San Fran-freaking-cisco Forty-freaking-Niners.

Their brief but bitter rivalry did not evolve because of geography or any type of media-fueled dichotomy between the teams or their fan bases. These teams disliked each other primarily because they were the only grown-ups sitting at the kids' table.

For a hot second in the late 1940s, the Browns and 49ers were football's equivalent of West Side Story's Jets and Sharks, with no Officer Krupke in sight. Their disdain for one another originated in the days when both teams were members of the All-American Football Conference - *the* members, quite frankly - and rolled over the rest of the upstart league like Genghis Khan on angel dust.

Consequently, each time they played one another was an event, often containing the rich backstory and subplots of a Dostoyevsky novel.

In those four AAFC seasons, the Browns lost only four games - two to San Francisco. The 49ers, meanwhile, lost 15 - seven at the hands of the Browns.

They were always ruining each other's parties, reflected in October of 1949 when the Browns extended their incredible unbeaten streak to 29 games, then saw it come to a screeching halt against the 49ers in a jarring 56-28 loss.

The year before, the teams met in Cleveland with a combined 19-0 record- best for a single game in football history.

Both teams were built around explosive offenses and could light up scoreboards from coast to coast.

Fittingly, when the teams crack helmets this Sunday, it will be the 62nd anniversary of perhaps the most memorable of their AAFC encounters - a thrilling 30-28 Browns' win in Cleveland that avenged the loss that ended their unbeaten streak.

Almost immediately upon joining the NFL, the rivalry evaporated. While the Browns hit the ground running, the 49ers proved to be less prepared for the big time, falling to 3-9 in their first season.

Even in an NFL barely one-third the size of its current monstrosity, the Browns and 49ers only played seven times in their first 20 years after the demise of the AAFC.

They came within one of the NFL's greatest choke-jobs of playing for the league title in 1957, but San Francisco squandered a 27-7 second-half lead and Detroit wound up winning their playoff game and then crushing the Browns in the championship. And subsequently crushing the last chance of reviving the Browns-Niners animosity.

The teams became even further estranged following the AFL/NFL merger in 1970 and have played only 10 times in the 41 years since. Their only connection of the last four decades has been both franchises being sabotaged by smooth-talking Carmen Policy and still-unemployable Dwight Clark - the Leopold and Loeb of front-office management.

Well, that and Braylon Edwards, who has now managed to disappoint fans from coast to coast.

You could try to light a fire under the rivalry by pitting Cleveland's Schlitz-fueled rust-belt

toughness with San Francisco's lily-livered liberalism, but what would be the point? Trying to recreate a rivalry is like trying to re-fall in love with someone who dumped you, took your Led Zeppelin CDs, and moved in with somebody else. These things just happen on their own.

And naturally, with both teams scuffling over the past decade-plus, their rare meetings have become decidedly meaningless with nothing - not even pride - at stake.

The last time the Browns and 49ers played in a season in which both finished with winning records? 1987. Before that, 1968.

This, friends, is how a rivalry dies.

Even if none of today's current Browns or 49ers players have any understanding of that brief warfare between the respected franchises, they can represent its revival - even if just for three hours late Sunday afternoon.

Otto and The Toe can't do it anymore, so it's up to Colt and Cribbs. Win this one for our grandfathers, who hated those 49ers the way we hate the Steelers.

Deep down inside, you know that if you saw that freckle-faced kid now all grown up at the mall with his own kids, you would still scoop up a four-square ball, rifle it with all your might, and drill him right between the eyes.

These things shouldn't be forgotten.

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