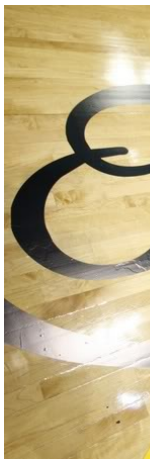
These are rather confusing times for most Cleveland sports fans. It's early June and they're still rooting for a team whose season started nearly eight months ago. Meanwhile, the team whose attention usually occupies their minds right about now is all but being ignored for the moment. And that other team, the one that appears on the scene by mid-July, can hardly get any ink at all. Gary Benz talks about shifting priorities for Cleveland sports fans in his latest.



These are rather confusing times for most Cleveland sports fans. It's early June and they're still rooting for a team whose season started nearly eight months ago. Meanwhile, the team whose attention usually occupies their minds right about now is all but being ignored for the moment. And that other team, the one that appears on the scene by mid-July, can hardly get any ink at all.

Making matters worse, as usual, is the local media, particularly the television stations. They know of only one way to act and that's to overreact, mainly because most of them are carpetbaggers. You had to like the intrepid reporter on Channel 5's morning news program Tuesday, a reporter who probably just recently learned how to pronounce Cuyahoga, interviewing Trapper Jack (yes, Trapper Jack!) the morning disc jockey on a local soft rock radio station. What the reporter wanted to know was what callers were telling Trapper about the Cavs. The reporter couldn't possibly have looked more awkward if she were wearing a barrel and smoking a pipe. Not to do her job for her, but if you're going to check in with callers to a radio station, perhaps a visit to, say, WTAM, which actually runs a morning talk show, would have been more productive. And so it goes.

Soon, you'll see the hosts of the local news shows, when they aren't proclaiming themselves the exclusive this or the official that with regard to the Cavs, adorned in Cavs colors and reading their teleprompters from sets covered in Cavs pennants. By Thursday, Wilma Smith will probably be wearing a LeBron jersey and doing a live remote from the Riverwalk in San Antonio. That may not be the end of the world as we know it but it's at least the 3,243rd reason to ignore the local media.

But if you're a Cleveland sports fan over the age of 35, these are legitimately confusing times. For those, there used to be a very specific rhythm to Cleveland sports, which the Cavs playoff run as disrupted. The sporting year began in early April with the Indians home opener. The baseball season would end sometime around early July when the Browns reported to camp. Whether the Browns were good or not, it usually carried fans interest until at least Christmas. Once the Bowl season ended, it was nearly Super Bowl time, which, until a few years ago carried you into late January. Now it's early February. But then came the dark days for the next two or so months that had to be endured until the Indians trekked off to Tucson (now Winter Haven, soon to be Arizona again) for spring training. But the interim was used to complete the chores that had been piling up, things like painting and wallpapering, for example. And then, come lat March the cycle began again.

Though the Cavs have been around since 1971, they had never realized enough sustained success to actually alter that rhythm. There was nothing particularly magical about opening night and unless the Lakers were making their once yearly appearance, scant reason to head to actually head to a game.

Certainly this wasn't only true, just mostly. There was excitement during that first season or two and then came the Miracle of Richfield season of 1975-1976. But for the next decade thereafter, the highest the Cavs ever finished in their division was 3rd and that was in 1977. When the Gunds bought the franchise and the team dodged a huge bullet by getting Brad Daugherty instead of Len Bias, the Cavs made more than a cameo appearance in the fans collective conscience. The teams during the period of 1987-1997 featured, at various times, Mark Price, Larry Nance, Brad Daugherty and Hot Rod Williams. Though the Cavs made several playoff appearances during that run, they made it past the first round only twice. Once injuries and age creeped in, the Cavs began a significant tailspin that didn't truly end until LeBron James arrived, following an unprecedented high school career just down the road in Akron.

In addition to a lackluster history that has featured only 16 playoff appearances since 1971 another factor contributing to the general malaise was that the Cavs played in a nice arena in the nice country town of Richfield. Unfortunately, it was too far off the beaten path from the main population centers of the Cleveland area. And other than Whitey's Booze and Burgers, the Tavern of Richfield or Barney Google's in the Holiday Inn there wasn't anywhere to really go either before or after the games.

Moreover, during this same time period, the growth in the Cleveland area was mostly in the suburbs east and west of the

city. It wasn't a perfect storm, necessarily, but it was a huge factor nonetheless contributing to the indifference. Venturing to a Cavs game in Richfield and having to traverse I-271 in the winter was always a cruel request. It's the reason, frankly, that the Gunds were all too willing to bring the team back downtown even though the Coliseum was one of the nicer venues in the league.

Additional factors also conspired to keep the Cavs mostly off the radar screen. For example, because the Cavs were not an elite team, they were hardly ever on national television and though they were broadcast locally, for the formative years of their existence, when loyalty is nourished, this was well before cable and ESPN. If you were lucky, maybe one game a week was on Channel 43, competing for time with Johnny Powers and Big Time Wrestling as well as reruns of Star Trek.

Additionally, to most fans NBA players were the most difficult to relate to, perhaps because Cleveland has never had much exposure to big time college basketball. And it wasn't as if NBA players had the best of reputations. Indeed, until Magic Johnson and Larry Bird entered the league, the NBA itself was having a huge image problem resulting in large part from its own sordid drug history. There's always been the perception, too, that NBA players refuse to play defense, that the officials

refuse to call fouls, particularly on elite players, and that with such an expanded playoff format, the regular season was essentially meaningless.

So a perennially bad team playing in a league that featured an inferior product competing for attention with fans in a football town with an undying affection for a bad baseball team always reduced the Cavs to also-ran status.

But just as Magic and Bird saved the NBA, with a huge assist from the Michael Jordan, LeBron James has saved this franchise. Particularly in the last two years, the Cavs now have a place on the calendar of most Cleveland fans, even if the hold on that calendar is still on the flimsy side. While no one was looking, the Cavs caused a reshuffling in priorities.

This season, given the Cavs playoff run, the Indians have all but been ignored, despite the fact that they have played 55 games, a full third of their season, and find themselves in first place over the Detroit Tigers. True, the weather this spring has been mostly miserable, but the Indians just aren't drawing yet. That probably isn't completely or even mostly attributable to the Cavs and their fortunes, but the attention that the Indians

neighbors on Gateway Plaza are drawing, particularly now, is a factor.

The Indians will find their audience, just not yet. When the Cavs complete their season in the next few weeks, fans will realize that this Indians team is unlike most of the Indians teams of their youth. This team isn't likely to swoon in June and die in July. When fans can refocus their attention they will see that this team is more like the teams of the late '90s, featuring a nice mix of pitching and hitting, that should make them a factor through September.

In reality, the team that is going to suffer from attention deficit is the Browns, and they only have themselves to blame. Cleveland may always be a football town first, but the local franchise has certainly tested the patience of its fans over the last decade and a half and it is having an impact. When Modell moved the team to Baltimore and Cleveland was without a team for four years, interest didn't die but it waned considerably. The return brought new excitement but since then the new Browns have been nothing short of an embarrassment to the great tradition they inherited. Though the franchise, for the first time ever, has an owner rich enough to not have to take out bank loans to sign overrated receivers, the team has otherwise been a mess from the top down. As it stands, the Browns are

having trouble renting out loges.

The drafting of Brady Quinn and Joe Thomas has brought renewed optimism, to be sure, but in the short run the only interest the Browns will probably draw will be in the preseason and then only to see Quinn's first few professional games. Once that occurs, Cleveland fans will return to the Indians and a potential playoff run. In other words, by the time real interest in the Browns returns, they will be four or five games into the season and if form holds, sporting at best a 1-3 record. Good luck with that.

In the end, the re-ordering of fan priorities is one of the more intriguing aspects of the emergence of the Cavs and the Indians. Whether the shift is permanent will play out over time, but it would be unwise to bet against Cavs owner Dan Gilbert. As hard as he has worked to this point, he'll work twice as hard to ensure that his place in line isn't squandered. The Browns will find if they haven't yet, that the years of mismanagement won't be tolerated forever. For once, they will have to earn their place back in the hearts and minds and wallets of Cleveland fans. Whether they truly are up to the task is iffy, at best.