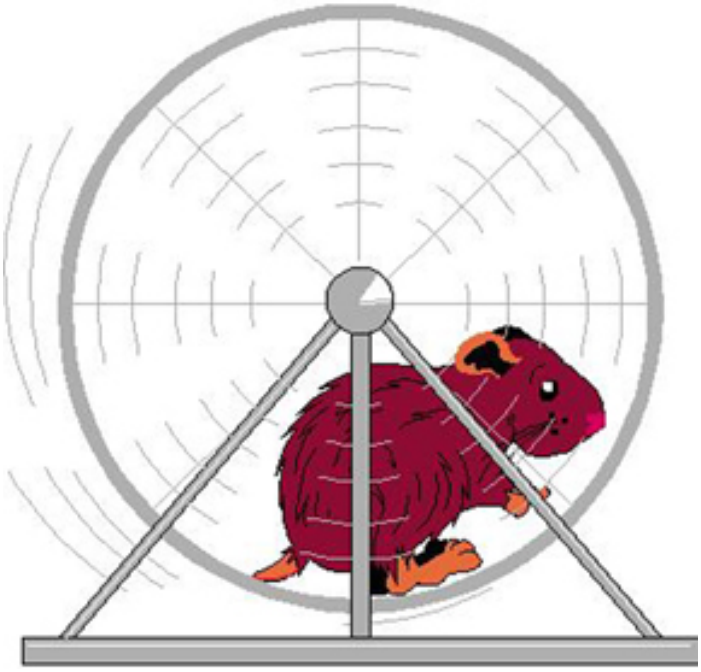

Every time I take a week off from the confined world that is Cleveland sports, I expect to come back to a changed landscape. Instead it's a world that moves with all the speed of a Judge Parker or Mary Worth story line. In this town you could literally go weeks without much news and you'd come back and nothing much will have changed.

The Cleveland Browns continued to make baby steps on their 10+ year journey through the NFL desert. The Cleveland Indians are getting ready to kick off their spring training and as usual there are more questions than answers.

But one thing did change, though not my feelings about it. The Cleveland Cavaliers won a game. They beat the Los Angeles Clippers in a game with a tenth of the stakes and 100 times the drama of the Cavaliers-Celtics playoff series last spring. I happened to be in the Los Angeles area and in a bar watching the end of that game. When J.J. Hickson blocked the shot at the end of regulation virtually none of the locals seemed to much care whether or not it was goal tending, mainly because they were far more invested in their cocktails than the outcome of the game.

After it was all over and the worst losing streak in professional sports was over, the few locals who even bothered to offer an opinion merely said "typical Clippers," which is exactly how I felt when the Cavaliers then lost to the Washington Wizards a few nights later.

That's the kind of bi-coastal fan loyalty I'm sure the NBA marketing executives dream of as they scratch themselves with bemusement as to why their league is careening toward irrelevance even as its popularity soars overseas.

A few weeks ago, I wrote that the NBA, like the NFL, was facing its own labor problems on the horizon and that it probably represented the best opportunity for Commissioner David Stern to fix what ails his league. It doesn't look promising.

In a profile of Stern published in the L.A. Times this past weekend, Stern was mostly dismissive of any suggestion that more and more owners are hawkish on fundamentally changing the league's business model given that Forbes magazine estimates that more than half of all NBA teams lost money last year.

That's probably posturing in the name of unity on Stern's part but if NBA owners are hawkish only about re-dividing the league's revenue pie without first taking on the league's more fundamental problems, then all they will have accomplished is a way to grab more money from a pool that will eventually contract before it expands.

There is a fundamental difference between the dispute the NFL is having with its union and the conversation the NBA is having with its. The NFL has a business model that mostly works. The NBA does not. NFL owners want to re-cut a growing pie as a way of compensating themselves for the huge investments they make so that the league can thrive. Their requests aren't unreasonable.

NBA owners, led by Donald Sterling of the Clippers, are focused similarly on re-cutting the pie but lack the underpinnings of a business that can continue to grow those revenues, at least organically. Put it this way, in the NFL virtually every team without the name "Cleveland" in its title can and has made the Super Bowl. In the NBA, the Finals are reserved for a select few teams while the rest of the league twiddles its thumbs, seemingly content on drafting off the revenues generated by others. Meanwhile the fans in those cities are sold the false premise of possibility.

Maybe it's that those running the NBA don't see their league on a downward spiral at all, which means that the league will once again have to hit rock bottom, as it did about 25-30 years ago when drugs and money dominated the storyline and fan interest waned accordingly, before working its way back into the collective conscience.

But until that happens, in this corner of the world and in most other corners of the NBA world nothing much will change. The Cavaliers and teams like them will spin their wheels for the better part of the next decade simply because the NBA runs counter to logic. It has the least number of players on its rosters of any professional sport and yet is the most difficult of all in which to build a champion.

The reason it runs in this direction has everything to do with its expansive playoff system and its byzantine salary structure. These combine to punish teams into mediocrity while the very few teams lucky enough to have a top player fall into their laps eventually find themselves at the top of the league.

When it comes to the playoffs, only the truly bad teams miss out each season and hence enter the NBA's draft lottery. And yet these bottom feeders are actually the lucky ones. They at least have a chance at one of the first picks and the opportunity to perhaps get the next superstar around which to build. The teams stuck in the bottom seeds of the playoff system year after year end up having far more difficult time getting up to the next level.

As a good friend pointed out to me, consider the Cavaliers when Mike Fratello was the head coach. He was defensive-minded and a rather decent coach, actually. Not great, certainly, but credible. The problem was that as a coach his teams were just good enough to sneak into the playoffs each year but never really good enough to be a threat to win it all. All this did was hurt the Cavaliers' drafting status each year, keeping them in the same place, like a hamster running on a wheel.

There's certainly an argument there that the problem all along in Cleveland was ownership and front office related and that might have some merit except for the fact that this same kind of story plays out in city after city around the NBA.

Let's stick with Fratello for a moment. He became the Hawks' head coach in 1983 and lasted

through the 1989-1990 season. In 7 of his 9 seasons, the Hawks made the playoffs. Usually that would be cause for rejoice except it really wasn't. The Hawks, like the Cavaliers under Fratello, were always just good enough to get into the playoffs but never advanced very far. All that did was kept them from the draft lottery most years, which meant it kept them away from the best players in the draft.

Now this all could be an indictment of Fratello except its not. Lenny Wilkins, a Hall of Fame coach, came in and repeated the pattern for much the same reasons. They Hawks had some good players but never great players. Eventually those that they had got old or went elsewhere and left the Hawks' roster looking pretty much like the Cavaliers' roster does today. From 1999 through the 2007 season, the Hawks missed the playoffs.

Having a better draft status has eventually led the Hawks back to respectability, if respectability is defined by making the playoffs but not getting very deep into them. That could turn around this season, but I doubt it, which means that the Hawks aren't likely to hang another championship banner any time soon to go along with the one they won in 1958!

You literally could go almost franchise by franchise and find similar stories. It's quite fascinating, actually, how often the pattern repeats.

If the playoff system is the reason number 1 why teams can't rebuild then the salary structure is reason 1A. It has more loopholes than the federal tax code and works as both a shield and sword. For teams like the Lakers, the Celtics, the Heat and even the San Antonio Spurs, it seems to stretch in almost unimaginable ways so that they can yield a roster that other teams could never afford. For others it is the sword the superstar wields to cut his departing franchise back down to size.

Why the NBA chooses to work in this fashion is hard to say. The owners aren't exactly a group of visionaries, which is another thing that separates them from their brethren in the NFL.

I suspect that the NBA will take on its union just as the NFL will and that there will be a lockout in both sports. But when the dust settles, I fully expect the NFL to be in better shape while the NBA will still be fundamentally unsound and worse off for the fight. For the locals, that means that eventually if the Browns management can find a level of competence that nearly every

other franchise has found, it will get to the Super Bowl. For the Cavaliers, the NBA Finals will remain a theory only just as it has for virtually the entire existence of the franchise.