We now live in a country where Gonzaga University has the finest college basketball team in the land.

Imagine your reaction 10 years ago if someone had told you this was going to happen. Perhaps laughter, perhaps tears out of a fear this meant that the United States was destined to crack in half at the Mississippi River, with everything to the east sinking to the bottom of the ocean. Either that or aliens.

Today it's easy to forget the downright adorable Gonzaga teams of the late 1990s that occasionally picked up pot-shot upset victories in the first round of the NCAA tournament that made us just want to squeeze their cheeks.

While Gonzaga's rise from novelty to behemoth has been well-documented and dozens of other small-to-mid-major programs are taking notes and inking up their proverbial mimeograph machines, it would be a mistake to think that the 'Zags' template applies only to college hoops.

Our own Cleveland Indians, for example, should sit up and take notice. For Gonzaga's journey is strikingly similar to the path the Tribe must take if it hopes to once again become a perennial contender in the dictatorial third-world landscape of Major League Baseball.

Admittedly, on the heels of the franchise's first exciting offseason since 1884, this topic may sound a little sour. But for as satisfying as the Indians' activities since Thanksgiving have been, let's all take a deep breath for a moment.

Yes, this has been the best Indians' offseason in more than a decade.

Yes, the team is now at least a solid 10 wins better than it was at the conclusion of last season.

Yes, the Indians should be more consistent, more enjoyable to watch, and less prone to months in which they go 5-24.

But no, they're not a contender.

First and foremost, we need to get out in front of the crazytrain that's about to pull out of the station, fueled entirely by the sweet optimism of pre-Easter baseball.

Understandably enamored with our suddenly lucid front office, Tribe fans need to accept the reality that we did not just inherit a playoff team. At best, this is a club that will finish .500 in 2013 - which in and of itself is something to celebrate after emerging from the chemical toilet that 2012 became.

Better things should be over the horizon - particularly following the probable trading of Asdrubal Cabrera and Chris Perez in July for what should be a handful of viable prospects.

But here's the reality: the Tigers and White Sox are still both better than the Indians, and it's arguable whether the Tribe is clearly better than either Kansas City or Minnesota.

But it is here where the debate and focus should be - competing with our Central Division foes rather than nonsensically trying to compare ourselves to the big-market, big-money Yankees, Red Sox, or Angels.

Not unlike Gonzaga trying to match up with Kentucky or Duke in 1998.

We can debate the injustice of baseball economics forever, but it's not changing anytime soon. Barring days and nights of bitterness and anger (and we already have enough of those), it's better to just accept it and embrace the reality of the Indians' competitive mission.

Put simply, it's that they're in the same boat as a handful of the plucky, not-quite-good-enough for ESPN2 college basketball programs we see playing their hearts out this time of year. The landscape that just selected Gonzaga as its prime minister.

The AL Central is the Patriot League. The Mid-Atlantic Athletic Conference. The Ivy League. Gonzaga's West Coast Conference. Take your pick. It's a perfectly acceptable little circuit reluctantly acknowledged by the corporate entity that oversees the sport by permitting its finest team - and only its finest team - to participate in its postseason bacchanalia.

That's not a shot at the NCAA, since March Madness embodies the most democratic and well-balanced postseason format yet created in organized sport. And while good-hearted, most of these conferences genuinely don't have enough talent to justify a second team in the big dance.

Just like the Central Division. Thus, the Indians' goal each year should not be on improving its team to make it one of the best in the American League. This would be both fruitless and hysterical. Their whole world - and only world - should be the Central Division.

Just as, for the better part of the last two decades, Gonzaga's reason for breathing was winning the WCC. That was their meal ticket. They recognized it, adapted, and have eaten quite well, allowing their long-term plans to take root and becoming more relevant with each NCAA tournament appearance.

Even with baseball's additional wild card (or the preposterous play-in games in the NCAA tournament), the only way a team like the Indians (or, until recently, Gonzaga) will make it into the postseason is by winning their division/conference.

Ironically, this is precisely the mindset the Indians had under John Hart's executive leadership in the late 1990s. He stated time and again that the team's philosophy and only real goal each year was to win the Central Division. By doing so, you'd be in the playoffs, and then anything could happen. And sometimes did.

It's a deliciously simple and utilitarian point of view. The problem was, those Indians teams would clinch the division the day pitchers and catchers reported, making the next seven months a dispassionate practice session preparing for the playoffs.

Those Tribe teams should have been barreling into the offseason talking about moves that were going to take it to the World Series, never even acknowledging their division. I don't know mean to say they would have made different or better moves in the offseason with this mentality, but hearing Hart talk about just hoping to win the Central Division every winter seemed to be shooting incredibly low.

Now Hart's words need to be brought back and etched in gold brackets mounted within every office in the strange little building hanging off the Ontario side of Progressive Field: Win the Central and then anything can happen. Compete in the Central every single year and you gradually become legitimate and respected. Win it a few times, become a regular guest to the party in October, and suddenly free agents may actually want to play here. Maybe, just maybe, you won't have to trade every single talented player about to reach the end of his contract.

It's also homeopathic. As much as Indians fans (and their front office, to some extent) love to complain about the financial imbalance of baseball, it's difficult to respect that argument coming from a team that can't win 70 games in a season. When you get to a station like Tampa Bay or Oakland has achieved, when you're succeeding in your modest little world and just can't get over the big-boy hump, then you've got a right to complain.

Win your division regularly and you earn all sorts of whining rights. Until then, you're just looking for a bailout from your own incompetence.

If Gonzaga had complained about the unfair logistics of college basketball in 1999, we would

have laughed. Actually, no, we wouldn't even have heard them. Were they to do so now, we'd be all ears.

The No. 1-ranked college basketball team in the country could be the Indians of the future: the under-funded, unappreciated, whip-smart wallflowers who made the sweetest-tasting lemonade out of a wheelbarrow of filth-coated lemons.

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