All right, Cleveland. It's time to face some cold, hard facts. The Indians are in a pennant race, whether you want to admit it or not. And after five months of putting this team on the back burner, it's time to realize that this is one of those times that don't come around all that often in these parts. Papa Cass talks about the thrill of the pennant race in his latest effort for us.

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It's time to drag yourself, kicking and screaming, to the likely conclusion that you are going to develop an emotional attachment to this team over the next two months. You've played it cool since April. You've done a really good job of keeping your emotional distance so far. You've had that "I told you so" on the tip of your tongue since spring training.

You don't trust Larry Dolan. You don't trust Mark Shapiro. You certainly don't trust Eric Wedge. You desperately want to believe that the Indians are just keeping first place warm for the inevitable stretch-run Detroit surge, a belief you hold near like a security blanket so that you can give a dismissive scoff if and when the Indians fall flat on their collective faces like they did in the final week of 2005.

But I have news for you: That resolve is going to melt away. You're like someone who has been on one too many bad dates and vows to completely detach from the opposite sex. How long do you think you can keep that pledge?

You have had built-in excuses all year. The Cavaliers preoccupied you into June. Almost immediately after that, it was the Fourth of July, vacation time, and then

the buzz surrounding the arrival of Joe Thomas and Brady Quinn at Browns camp.

Those excuses are gone. The Cavs have been stone-silent all summer, Quinn has found his place behind Charlie Frye on the depth chart and the only federal holiday standing between you and October is Labor Day.

After months and months of waiting for the other shoe to drop before the stretch run arrived, it didn't happen. September starts on Saturday, and the Indians are in first place.

They could have saved you the trouble, like they did last year. They could have saved you the tension of a September push for the playoffs, of an October postseason run where it is statistically probable that your team will end the season with a loss.

They could have saved you all the hassle and just dropped out of contention in June. But they didn't. And now, despite your thick Cleveland psychological callouses, you will soon be compelled to take a front-row seat and watch.

The Indians will soon become the biggest story in town. And the only thing you can do is hang on for the ride. In Cleveland, where every pennant race and postseason run since 1964 has inevitably crash-landed at some point, that's a tall order to fill. But it's too late to stop now.

Welcome to the 2007 American League playoff race. Fasten your seat belts.