It's been a rough stretch for Cleveland Browns football. I don't have to tell anyone visiting this site that fact. Non-stop losing, absentee ownership, and constant upheaval in the front office and coaching staff. However, if you look at the Browns overall success over the last seven years, it's not much different than that of the Indians. Yet, as similar as are the fates of the two franchises since 2002, the perceptions of each are totally different. Jesse Lamovsky writes about it in his latest column.

Okay boys and girls; let's play a little game called "Name That Cleveland Team." I'll throw out several hints, and based on those hints, see if you can guess the identity of the team in question. Ready? On your mark, get set... go!

Since 2002, this team has put together two winning seasons and made it to the postseason once. One of those winning records would have been good enough for a playoff berth in most seasons- but not the season in question, alas.

In the season that ended without a trip to the playoffs, this team started relatively slowly, got hot midway through the season, controlled its fate down the stretch, lost that control with a critical eleventh-hour pratfall against an inferior opponent, and didn't receive the help it required from elsewhere to make the postseason.

In the season this team *did* make the playoffs, it jumped out to a large lead over a bitter, longtime rival, then collapsed in ignominious fashion and was eliminated, penning a new chapter in the ever-thickening tome of Cleveland sports woes.

In 2005, this team was utterly and ruthlessly dominated by a division rival that went on to win the World Championship.

This team has compiled an awful track record in the draft over the last decade or so, with one premium pick after another failing to make an impact.

This team entered the 2008 season with sky-high hopes, and proceeded to fall flat on its face right out of the gate.

The "face of the team" is a guy with matinee-idol looks whose performance hasn't lived up to the hype and who wouldn't be nearly so highly thought of if he looked like, say, me.

Do you know what team I'm talking about? If you guessed the Browns, you're right. If you guessed the Indians... you're also right.

Sad but true- over the last seven years, the Browns and the Indians are essentially identical in terms of overall success. Each team has two winning seasons since 2002. Each has one playoff appearance that ended in a wholesale choke job against an ancient rival- the Browns in the 2002 Wild Card round against Pittsburgh, the Indians in the 2007 ALCS against Boston. Each team had a late-season collapse to cost itself a playoff berth- the Indians with their 1-6 nosedive to end 2005, the Browns with the disaster in Cincinnati in Week Sixteen of 2007. Each team spent the 2005 season as the exclusive property of a World Champion division rival- the White Sox (who went 14-5 against the Indians, including 9-1 at the Jake) and the Steelers (who turned in their customary sweep, punctuated by the 41-0 Eve of Destruction.) Each team has drafted atrociously in the first round- the Indians taking the likes of Michael Aubrey, Earl Snyder and Trevor Crowe, the Browns the likes of William Green and Kameron Wimbley. And each has the golden boy whose performance hasn't equaled his billing- Brady Quinn, who has thrown 97 passes in two seasons, and Grady Sizemore, a whiff machine with a throwing arm that makes Johnny Damon's chicken wing look Dave Parker-esque by comparison.

(If you think I'm being hard on Grady, consider that he would have been the fourth

outfielder on the 1995 team. He wouldn't have even started. He would have taken Wayne Kirby's job, and that's it.)

In fairness to the Indians, their .498 winning percentage since 2002 is considerably better than the dismal .375 the Browns have sported in the same timeframe. The Tribe also has a division title, something the Browns haven't won since 1989. But those distinctions are nitpicking, in light of the fact that both teams have basically been also-rans for the majority of the decade. Actually, the disparity in win percentage can be accounted for thus: the Indians tend to get hot after they've been eliminated from the race, while the Browns tend to fall apart completely. One team wins a lot of meaningless games; one loses a lot of meaningless games. Viva la difference.

But as similar as are the fates of the two franchises since 2002, the perceptions of each are totally different. The Browns are seen as a train wreck, and rightfully so, given the almost non-stop losing, the absentee ownership, and the constant upheaval in the front office and coaching staff that has plagued the franchise in the last decade. Yet strangely enough given the fact that they have been more or less stuck in mediocrity for years, the Indians enjoy a much more positive reputation. They're seen by many as a model organization, a paragon of shrewd decision-making and outstanding player development, a beacon of small-market success in the *laizzae faire* world of major-league baseball economics.

It doesn't hurt the Tribe's image that, unlike the Browns, they have had stability in the front office and in the manager's chair. Mark Shapiro in particular is a public-relations Godsend- Ivy League-educated, modern, a master spin artist who could probably talk his way into a bank vault, if not the World Series. He is brilliant at creating the illusion of forward-thinking and competence, and people buy in. Never mind that his drafts have been lousy, he can't build a bullpen or find a decent corner player to save his life, and that he's basically an average-at-best GM who has lived off of one blockbuster trade. With Shapiro, as with the Indians, it's all about perception.

Or maybe it isn't. Maybe the record really does matter more than the praise of Peter Gammons, the obsequiousness of bloggers and message-board posters and the sparkling grades ladled out by Baseball America. Maybe what counts really are those two lonely winning seasons in seven, that one playoff appearance, and in a division that doesn't exactly house baseball's jet-set either. Sure, you can make excuses about market realities, about the Indians being the third team in a three-team town, about the economy, about injuries and underperforming players and plain old bad luck- but at some point this organization is going to have to start owning its record.

Just like the Browns.