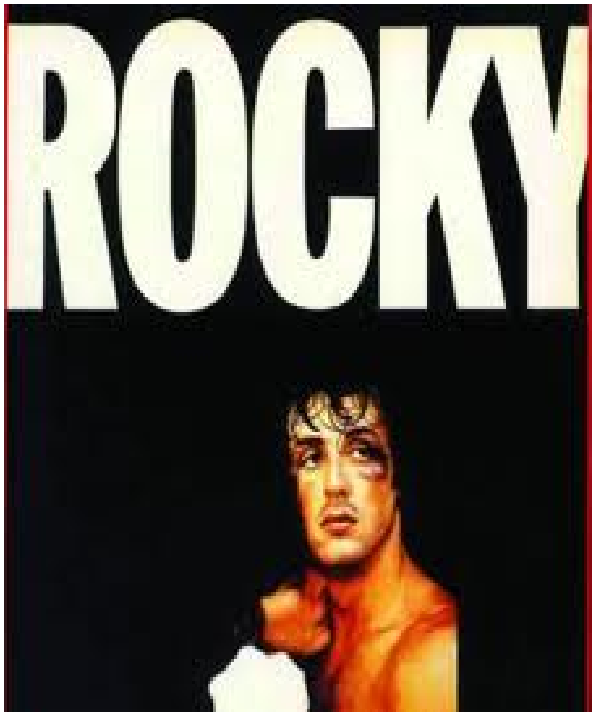

The *Plain Dealer* is having a “Talkin’ Tribe” Opening-Day breakfast on April 12th, and I am apathetic.

Some buddies contacted me about attending the gala affair, at which writers Paul Hoynes, Terry Pluto and Dennis Manoloff will wax poetic about this year’s team. Under normal circumstances, in other years when the outlook was a little brighter, I might eagerly ante up the 25 bucks, because I’m normally one of the most optimistic guys you’ll ever meet. But the Indians? This year? Blah.

I love baseball. Dating back to 1958, among all the sports, it’s my first love, and there’s nothing more enduring than a young man’s first love, is there?

During my sportswriting career, I interviewed Hall of Famers Frank Robinson, Al Kaline and many others. Last spring, I even went so far as to enroll in the Greater Cleveland Adult Baseball League at the ripe old age of you-don’t-need-to-know. Back in the '60s, '70s and '80s, I loved to visit Municipal Stadium, and now I love to visit Progressive Field. I love to watch the pitchers concentrate on every pitch and the batters concentrate even harder. I love to hear the crack of the bat and wait for monstrous collisions at home plate. I love the booming voice on the loudspeakers and the pungent aromas of the food. I love to watch some of the game’s all-time great players visit

Cleveland.

But that's the rub, and a big rub it is. You can't see "great players" -- not even one -- on a daily basis in Cleveland any more; you have to pick and choose certain games to attend.

Oh, you can see a few "good" players in the red-and-blue; but the Herb Scores, the Luis Tiants, the Rocky Colavitos, the Manny Ramirezes, the Jim Thomes and the CC Sabathias are all now long, long gone.

Last season, after the horrendous start, I visited Ontario and Carnegie a few times, but the things that stand out in my memory were the hot dogs and the seventh-inning condiment races. This summer, I'll still make a half-dozen trips to the ballyard for a first-hand look and catch some games on the tube to experience from afar the many things I love about baseball. But I won't be harboring any outrageous dreams of the Indians winning a world championship anytime soon.

What I'm saying is that I'm really not IN the Cleveland Indians this spring, despite all the television commercials and the glorious weather that beckons. I hate myself for it, but I can't reconcile the fact that the Tribe didn't do anything in the off-season to improve themselves after losing 97 games. Yes, they named a new manager and signed a journeyman or two, but they didn't really take any great strides. Consider this: their top two projected starting pitchers won a grand total of five games last season. Five!

If a dyed-in-the-wool lifetime fanatic like me cannot approach the coming season with a shred of enthusiasm for the Indians, how must marginal fans feel? Indeed, why should *anyone* be energized by this team -- especially with all the other wonderful things going on in Cleveland sports?

The Cavaliers have the best record in the NBA and a certain future Hall of Famer. They could be playing almost three months into the Indians' schedule. The Browns have a new front office and have made a substantial number of positive moves during the off-season. Their new president is a possible future Hall of Famer, and their training camp starts just a few weeks after the NBA Finals.

It doesn't take an Einstein to see that Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert and Browns owner Randy Lerner have made profound commitments to giving Cleveland winning teams. They have been working hard for my business and my allegiance for so many years that I'm much more inclined to visit the Q and Browns Stadium, even if the tickets cost an arm and a leg.

It is also clear, on the other hand, that Larry and Paul Dolan don't have the financial wherewithal to consistently field a winning team, and baseball's rules unfortunately do not let teams with smaller payrolls compete effectively year-in and year-out.

Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn. If the Dolans want my never-ending allegiance, my enthusiasm and my hard-earned dollars, they have to put a decent team on the field. Period. In professional sports, that means spending money to make money -- and the Dolans apparently don't have money to spend up front.

It's easy to talk about 2012 or 2013 (as Mark Shapiro is wont to do) if you're 20, 30, 40 or even 50 years old. In 2013, the GM probably will be talking about 2017. But in 2017, I'll be entering my eighth decade on this planet (God willing), and I'll probably still be waiting for the Indians to win a World Series championship.

Every night before bed, I clasp my hands in front of my chest, close my eyes and tilt my head toward the heavens. *Come on, Tribe, throw us a bone or two -- not just pie-in-the-sky promises for the future. Please?*