Twenty years ago, in the golden, pre-Vanilla Ice, post-Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle spring of 1990, I can remember marching home from Ferguson Junior High School, cracking open a Minute Maid orange soda, heating up some Chef Boyardee spaghetti and meatballs, and popping a well-worn VHS cassette into a VCR the size of a modern-day Prius.

But perhaps reflective of the person I would become, the videotape slid into the motorized mouth of the 1984-model RCA player was always the same one – recorded by a buddy lucky enough to have HBO and given to me along with the agreement that I also take off his hands a warped bumper pool table that had haunted his living room for the better part of the ’80s.

So each afternoon, after a rough battle with Algebra and diagramming sentences, I would return to the sanctuary of my family room, settle in with an orange soda and some Chef, and watch a movie I had already seen roughly 632 times and couldn’t wait to see again.

Is this heaven? No, it’s *Major League*.

I’m sure I’m not the only one afflicted with the incurable medical condition known as “Cleveland

fan" who longingly remembers it as the perfect movie at the perfect time. When it hit screens in the spring of '89, I was flabbergasted that Hollywood was officially recognizing the Cleveland Indians. I wasn't aware it was technically legal to make a movie about any baseball team other than the New York Yankees (in later years, I would discover this was actually the case). It not only related the perpetual suffering of being an Indians fan…

"So which team do you play for, Jake?

"The Indians."

"Here in Cleveland?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't know they still had a team."

…but then also took us on a fantasy only a talented screenwriter could concoct: the Tribe in a pennant race.

Keep in mind, at this point, Jacobs Field was like Social Security reform – a great idea everybody was in favor of, but you knew it would never actually happen. Albert Belle was still "Joey," Orel Hershiser was the reigning World Series MVP with the Dodgers, and Kenny Lofton had just played basketball for Arizona in the Final Four. The concept of the Indians finishing in third place in the AL East – let alone winning it – was science fiction. And bad science fiction, at that.

Which is why *Major League* was so embraced by Tribe fans. It was the ultimate daydream, allowing us to fantasize about what would happen if the Indians ever got their act together – or, as the movie suggests, were actually motivated to play up to their capabilities.

In those lean years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as I'd watch and re-watch the film, it started to become real. I loved that world so much – one in which the Indians were winning and were the toast of Cleveland – that I expanded the movie in my own mind, filling in the gaps with what I figured would be reality. (Later I would see this same trait in Norman Bates' compulsion to dress up as his mother and keep her corpse lying around the house, but the less said about this, the better.)

In *Major League*, there was enough emphasis on the course of the season itself to visualize it actually happening. From the "heartbreaking" 9-0 loss to the Yankees on opening day before almost 30 fans to a torturous loss in Texas in which the Tribe only collected one run on one hit…

"That's all we got? One God damn hit?"

"You can't say 'God damn' on the air!"

"Don't worry, nobody's listening anyway."

…the first half-hour of the movie sparkled with realism. At one point, evil new owner Rachel Phelps is complaining to GM Charlie Donovan (best known as the unsuspecting sheriff of Haddonfield in *Halloween*) that the team is showing signs of improvement at the first-quarter pole, standing at 15-24 – a record that seemed all too familiar. To us, 15-24 wasn't crafty screenwriting.

For the remainder of those Municipal Stadium days, I would always pay attention to the team's record after 39 games. If they'd won more than 15 games, I could stay optimistic: "Hey, they're ahead of the *Major League* Indians at this point – there's still time to turn it around just like they did." If not, I plunged into despair: "Good Lord, not even Hollywood can visualize a team this bad righting the ship." (Coincidentally, after 39 games, this year's Indians also stood at 15-24.)

They continued to muddle along as most Indians teams did in the early part of the summer, though gradually improving off-camera. Suddenly it's mid-August and the Indians are 60-60, nine games out of first. Rachel Phelps is furious, but we're beside ourselves with glee. A .500 record? In August? Yes, please!

"Fans, don't forget about die-hard night coming up at the Stadium – free admission to anyone who was actually alive the last time the Indians won a pennant."

After a loss to the Yankees (dropping them to 60-61 – 10 back but still happy), Donovan spills the beans to gravel-throated manager Lou Brown of Phelps' nefarious plot to secretly take the team's talent to South Beach. With the help of a rousing clubhouse meeting and a cardboard cutout, Lou lays down the gauntlet: he figures 32 victories in their final 41 games will win the whole f*cking thing.

Considering in those days (as well as these) it was *War and Peace* for the Indians to win three in a row, playing .750 baseball over the course of a month sounded preposterous, even for a genuine major-league team. Yet there is a precedent – the 1951 New York Giants (the "Giants Win the Pennant!" Giants) – rallied from 13 games down in August to catch the Brooklyn Dodgers by going 37-7 down the stretch. (Granted, history has shown they were cheating by stealing signals with a telescope in the center-field clubhouse at the Polo Grounds, but why ruin a good story?)

So the instrumental montage starts. The Indians start winning and Cleveland starts paying attention. Willie Mays Hayes steals home to secure a fifth straight victory. The Tribe sweeps the Angels out west to take over second place. They film an American Express commercial. Construction workers begin wearing Indians batting helmets on the job (likely violating about seven OSHA regulations). Hot teenage girls begin wearing "Wild Thing" t-shirts. Fans – including punk rockers and the janitor from *Scrubs* – begin gathering at bars to watch the Indians on TV.

If you watch this peppy little montage enough times, you can – and I often did – pretend it's really happening.

Weird? Probably. Pathetic? Certainly. And yet a lot healthier than hoping Alex Cole was the

spark who was going to turn the real-life Indians around.

The funny thing was, we knew, even then, that this is exactly what would happen if the Indians ever showed signs of life. Having seen what happened with the Browns in the ’80s, it wasn’t that far of a leap to see the city going bananas over the Tribe. The city would embrace a winning baseball team so hard it would crack its ribs.

In the movie, the Indians wind up tying for first on the last day of the season, setting up a one-game playoff with the Yankees for the division title – a la the Bucky Dent New York-Red Sox game of 1978.

Major League’s final game had Cleveland written all over it. Veteran junk-ball pitcher Eddie Harris, operating on Crisco and fumes, is hot, but things look bleak in the seventh when the Yankees break open a scoreless game with a two-run homer. Jake Taylor injures his hamstring running out a grounder in the eighth and hobbles back to the dugout. The jam-packed Stadium is subdued as the Tribe’s season is down to its final few outs.

Then, just like Sandy Alomar in the ’97 Division Series, Pedro Cerrano (who Jack Bauer would later make the president by yelling at people on *24*) comes through with a game-tying homer that sends the place bonkers. So excited, he kisses his beloved bat and carries it around the basepaths with him.

I can remember thinking, ‘If this were really the Indians, the umpires would call Cerrano out based on a technicality that you can’t actually carry your bat out of the box.’ Therefore the Indians would still be down and would almost certainly end up losing by one run. Cerrano would become Cleveland’s new Earnest Byner (or its predecessor to Dwayne Rudd) – remembered as the unfortunate hero who made the tragic mistake that ended a magical season. It would forever be remembered as “The Bat.”

Thirteen years old, and this is how my brain works. Thanks, John Elway.

But luckily, this isn’t really Cleveland, so we go to the ninth tied. Wild Thing Vaughn is called in

from the bullpen in probably the best moment of the film and strikes out the Yankees' hairy cleanup hitter with the bases loaded. In college five years later, I would think of this scene when Paul Assenmacher whiffed Ken Griffey and Jay Buhner swinging back-to-back with the go-ahead run on base in the seventh inning of Game Five of the '95 ALCS. "Just like Wild Thing!" I screamed in my cracker-box dorm room. Sadly, this was the only time those words were uttered while I lived there.

In the bottom of the ninth, we're teased with Cleveland reality when a stand-in by the name of "Tomlinson" (a young LaDainian perhaps?) drives a shot deep to left that almost clears the fence and delivers the division title but, in the true spirit of Indians baseball, doesn't quite, and it's caught at the wall. The Indians go on to win when Willie Mays Hayes comes home from second on Jake Taylor's trick bunt and the cinematic celebration begins.

I can remember turning to my father as the credits rolled the first time I saw it and saying in exasperation, "But what happens in the playoffs?"

To which he sagely replied, "It doesn't matter."

And I understood.

To this day, I try to hold on to that, to call back the clarity of that moment. The Indians were winners and had made Cleveland fall in love with them. This was so fantastic, it defied logic. What happened next was, in fact, irrelevant. Come to think of it, most Cleveland sports success stories are that way. Can we just roll the credits after the double-overtime win over the Jets in '86 or after Kenny Lofton sliding home beneath Randy Johnson in '95?

Of course, thanks to the dyspeptic *Major League II*, we discover that the Tribe went on to get swept in the ALCS by Chicago, which takes a little of the luster off the conclusion of the first movie, but not enough to ruin it.

I would argue that somewhere in Progressive Field, the Indians should acknowledge the *Major League*

team. Maybe with one of those faux pennants mounted to the upper deck in right field – "
Major League
AL East Champions." Some would argue against this because it didn't really happen. To me, it did, and that division title means as much as any of the others from the late '90s – probably more.

More than twenty years after those lazy afternoons with a can of Minute Maid and a bowl of Chef Boyardee, I look back on that film and that team – fictional though it may be – the way Red Sox fans look back on their Impossible Dream season of '67.

Thus the final line of dialogue of the movie echoes through the years – the great Bob Uecker as the great Harry Doyle providing Cleveland with its own "Giants win the pennant" moment:

"The Indians win it! The Indians win it! Oh my God, the Indians win it!!"

I'll still drink orange soda to that.