Groucho Marx once quipped that “time wounds all heels.” And for the embittered ex-supporters of Albert Belle, this used to be quite a comforting thought, indeed—certainly more so than some pipe dream of a friendly reconciliation down the road. As Cleveland’s original exiled anti-hero, Belle found little pity from Indians fans when a hip injury derailed his career in Baltimore at 34, or when Hall of Fame voters elected to ignore his Major League best 1,099 RBIs in the 1990s. “Poetic justice,” we might have called it at the time. So why is it, then, that the sight of a bloated, grey, and grizzled Belle—back in an Indians’ spring training facility for the first time in 16 years— actually feels more jarring than just? Is there a statute of limitations on bitterness, as there seemed to be last season with Jim Thome? Or is Albert-- looking decades beyond his 45 years-- merely providing a sad reminder that time will eventually dole out its damage on all of us?

Well, before we dig into that mess, I might as well mention that this is the first edition of *The Opposite Field*
—a new column I’ll be writing throughout the baseball season, with the admittedly vague goal of “taking what they give you and going the other way with it.” Usually, this will involve an unorthodox (i.e., poorly researched) brand of analysis on the ups and downs of the
2012
Cleveland Indians
. But since the big headline in Tribe camp this week (besides
Grady being Grady
) was the surprise cameo appearance by my all-time favorite opposite-field slugger of yore, it seems fitting to dedicate this pilot episode of
The Opposite Field
to Mr. Albert Jojuan Belle.

"We're Rehashing Old Memories"

If you missed the story as it trickled out on Tuesday (it wasn't exactly dominating Sportscenter), Belle finally decided to accept the persistent invitations of former teammates-turned-instructors Carlos Baerga and Kenny Lofton, traversing the 25 miles from his Scottsdale home to Goodyear to visit the team that drafted him 25 years ago. Sure, it's also the team he infamously bailed on after the '96 season, jumping to the heftier coffers of the division rival White Sox while addressing his once fiercely loyal Cleveland supporters as "village idiots." But nobody seemed particularly interested in discussing all that nonsense this week. This reunion/hugfest was about giving in to the gravitational pull of nostalgia, and-- for the once notoriously hard-edged Belle—recognizing how precious and fleeting those good times with good friends can be.

"I wanted to see the guys," Belle told reporters in a tone that could almost be mistaken for affable. "It's good to see them again. We're rehashing old memories."

So why the sudden sentimentalism from the snarling enigma they used to call Mr. Freeze? Well, some might say the antagonistic persona of his youth—the self-described "angry black man" he wanted the world to see him as—has inevitably created a middle-aged man with some deep regrets. Albert remains intimidating enough that no reporter dared threaten the good will in Goodyear by asking him about that lengthy public relations rap sheet— be it the trick-or-treaters incident, Hannah Storm, the corked bat, or his 2006 conviction for stalking a woman. In fact, aside from admitting that his career-ending injury was "devastating," the only window into Belle's possible disappointment with the past came through a fairly loaded statement on the mighty mid '90s Tribe team that he left behind.

“We probably would’ve gotten way more credit had we won the World Series [in 1995],” Belle said. “We were the Cinderella team. All of America embraced us and I think everybody in Cleveland had some kind of Indians jersey or hat or something on. It was a nice run. We did a phenomenal job. I just wish we could’ve all stayed together to get a chance to try to bring one home. We never did.”

Now, it’s important to remember that Belle has been very vocal in the past about Indians management being entirely responsible for failing to keep not only himself, but also Thome, Manny Ramirez, and even more recent stars like CC Sabathia and Cliff Lee. So, it’s a bit of a leap to presume from the above statement that he might actually have some personal regrets about leaving Cleveland. That said, he probably has some personal regrets about leaving Cleveland.

Mr. Mom

Then there’s the possibility that Belle’s fence-mending efforts have far more to do with his present than his past. A rare athlete that married and had children after his playing days were over, Belle is currently the stay-at-home father of four daughters—a role that would absolutely, unavoidably change *anyone*. With a family to care for, one could imagine the old curmudgeon’s heart growing several sizes in Grinch fashion, eventually opening the door for his joyous return to Whoville. Or Wahooville, I guess.

“I’m Mr. Mom,” Belle said with a grin. “Facing [David] Cone and [Roger] Clemens was easy compared to being a dad. It seems like all the kids get tired and cranky at the same time.”

That’s right, Albert Belle is complaining about someone else getting cranky. Beyond the irony, though, this whole family narrative changes things considerably. Albert might look more like Kenny Lofton’s dad than his old teammate now, but it’s not necessarily because he’s a husk of a man defeated by his own demons. It might just be that he’s raising four effing kids.

Tragedy

So, the past may or may not haunt Albert Belle, and the present may or may not have softened him. But it's a safe assumption that one recent event from his life likely played as big a role as any in inspiring him to reconnect with those who've known him best. Last fall, Belle's twin brother Terry was tragically killed in an automobile accident in Paradise Valley, Arizona, leaving behind two children of his own.

During Albert's playing career, it was Terry—a former ballplayer himself as LSU—who often played the role of the cooler, calmer sibling; speaking to the media and defending his brother with intelligence and conviction. Both Belle brothers were accomplished students and Eagle scouts in their native Shreveport, but it was Terry who managed to harness his angst in a way his brother never quite could.

In all likelihood, Albert doesn't become the family man he is now without Terry's steadying force during those darker days. And whether you think fondly of #8 or still carry a grudge for what happened 15 years ago, it's hard not to respect a man dealing with a painful loss by trying to make something better of himself. Sure, he's certainly *looked* better. But go find a picture of yourself from the late '90s, compare it to the mirror in your bathroom, and see if you're still chuckling. Fact: watching your childhood heroes (
and
villains) get old is never a particularly satisfying experience.

Next Step?

With this first barrier knocked down, there's already speculation that Albert Belle may yet find his way back to Cleveland—the focus of some sort of congratulatory career acknowledgment or even a spot in the Indians Hall of Fame. It's amusing that, just weeks after LeBron James suggested he'd be open to returning to the Cavs some day, the Indians' greatest turncoat made similar gestures to virtually zero fanfare. Turns out, whether time heals all wounds, wounds all heels, or just makes stuff harder to remember, it's never wise to say anything is impossible.