It's a simple question based on factors such as population, income and economic development but the answer may be harder than we as sports fans can bare: Is Cleveland still capable of supporting three sports teams?

The Chris Perez comments and the seemingly sudden and endless discussion of Indians attendance makes the question timely, if not horrifying. But with 15,000 people per night showing up at Progressive Field to watch a first place ball club it's fair to ask whether Cleveland can continue to play host to an NFL, NBA and MLB team and do so successfully.

Some of the issue is simply pure population. In 1950 Cleveland had a population of nearly 1million people. In each decade after that high water mark was achieved the population has dropped. In 1990, right before the Gateway and Jacobs Field boom, the population was 500k. The 2010 census indicated Cleveland's population was 396k and it continues to drop.

Yes, a lot of people who had lived in the city moved to the outer rings and the suburbs over the past few decades but the Cleveland/Elyria/Mentor statistical area had just over 2million residents according to 2011 studies. That makes that statistical area the 28th largest in the country. "Mid-market" may be optimistic when you look at things that way, although it's accurate if your statistical area of measurement is Elyria/Cleveland/Akron which ranks 15th in the country.

Keep in mind that the debate over whether Cleveland and Akron is a loving couple and in things together is up for debate. Especially after July of 2010.

One of the areas where you can see the effect of the economy is with the Indians loges and suites at Progressive Field. Most of them are empty on most nights. And while I know the Indians are big proponents of the new wave of social media and that they love kids and quirks, the Tribe brass isn't turning loges and suites into Social Suites and Man Caves or game rooms if they're able to sell them to local businesses every night. There are simply fewer corporations purchasing suites annually. The big guys still represent but the big guys are few and far between. In Cleveland you have Progressive, The Cleveland Clinic, Steris, Sherwin Williams and a few other huge corporations. The mid-size guys have been lost to the economy choosing to not spend six figures on luxury suites in this business environment.

Compare the business scene here to a city like Milwaukee that supports three teams (and Green Bay is close enough to make the point). In Milwaukee you have businesses such as Harley-Davidson, Kohl's, Allen Bradley, Briggs and Stratton, Rockwell Automation, Rockwell International, Clark Brands, Miller Brewing, Pabst Brewing, Northwestern Mutual, Redstar Yeast and Master Lock, not to mention dozens of other recognizable and large corporations. Milwaukee, despite its relative anonymity, is bigger and healthier than Cleveland from a corporate population and the metropolitan area is actually quite similar in numbers to Cleveland.

Milwaukee supports their teams too. The Green Bay fan base is world renowned and the fans go out and watch the Brewers and the Bucks as well. City size and population doesn't explain the difference between the two towns alone.

Nor does business involvement alone explain the issue. It's huge when you look at the number of big companies that lay down big bucks with the teams in Milwaukee but the Browns draw big crowds too, in the same environment that the Indians and Cavs exist in. And this is where it starts to get a bit odd.

I've heard dozens of people tell me that if they win, fans will flock to see the Tribe. But is this actually the case? No one is going to see a first place, winning Tribe team right now and Browns Stadium is pretty much filled to capacity every Sunday the home team shows up to get its ass kicked. The Browns haven't won but people go. The Indians lead the Central after 41 games and no one's there? It's not all the weather either. You ever been to CBS on a late December afternoon or evening when 30mph winds are whipping through a misty rain or wet

snow? It's often worse than sitting in 40-45 degree weather to watch the Indians play an early season game.

I think we have to face the fact that we live in predominantly a football town. The Browns simply will not suffer and people look at the weekly trek to the stadium as part of their weekend and part of their heritage. It's ingrained. Browns fans ARE lemmings in nearly every sense. They arrive at the lot at the same time of the same months every year. They bring the same kind beer and the same kind of food and party with the same people (those who didn't die of heart disease or liver disease during the off season) and they blow off a week's worth of steam that's built up from living in an area where there are fewer jobs and fewer opportunities.

The Cavs play indoors and play mostly on nights when the Browns do not. They pump in artificial noise and have hundreds of ancillary events taking place whenever a basketball is not being dribbled or shot. There is not a second where the mind or ears or eyes are not being stimulated by something going on and The Q is a decent enough place to watch the very best athletes in the world during the middle of the Cleveland winters.

The Indians face far bigger challenges. They play 81 home games, not one of which is as critical in and of itself as one of eight NFL home games. They play when the weather is decent and there are other equally affordable options for folks to occupy themselves with such as beaches and boating and doing whatever they do outside when the weather is warm. You have a team playing downtown that has no real eye-grabbing, attention-getting star. You have a team that has the reputation of not spending a big amount of money and one that has come up short in big moments on the field in the past few years. Just last year people got excited over a fast start only to see the club falter and gasp and hiccup it's way to 15 games out of first place by the time the year ended.

Add that to the much publicized CC Sabathia and Cliff Lee free agent year trades that did not yield what it probably should have and you get the perfect storm of issues facing the Indians: they play in a depressed market with less corporate support than in other similar markets, they haven't been successful or creative enough in acquiring enough talent to win a title, and there are other competitors for what dollars are available here that either market themselves better or are a favorite son.

You can complain about the Browns all day. Football is king whether you hate it or love it. Crying about it doesn't change the fact.

You can bitch about how rotten a game NBA basketball is with inmates running the asylum and six teams having an actual chance to win. I'd agree with you. But the NBA does a better job of marketing itself than MLB does and they can give you greatness every single night in one of the two uniforms that take the court.

My fear is that what all of this means is Cleveland is Buffalo and no longer capable of feeding three mouths at the sports dinner table. I don't want to face that any more than you do but when you have a first place team that can't get out of the basement from an attendance perspective than you really have to look inwardly to see what the issue is. If you're reading this you're likely a die-hard fan who goes to games and supports teams and in all likelihood you're a huge Tribe fan too. But the bottom line is that not enough people are going to Indians games. People are not going to watch a first place team.

That is not healthy and, despite our fears and emotional reactions to the contrary, it's not healthy or sustainable long term. I'm not telling you to go. I'm not telling you to rally friends and relatives to go. I'm not agreeing with Chris Perez as I'd rather that mediocre pitchers just shut up and pitch as Perez will one day chase the last dollar and go play elsewhere no matter how high and mighty he sits today. Sellouts didn't stop Albert Belle from doing it or LeBron James from doing it and Perez will do it too. I'm just telling you only that there will be a price to pay for continued lack of support.

And it's a huge price that will ultimately leave a gaping hole in the community ending with all 43,345 seats in Progressive Field being available every night of future baseball seasons. And that I personally have a growing concern that there's not much that can be done about it.

Can someone with deeper pockets and more creativity who finds people that make better decisions make it work for the Indians? Maybe. But my fear is that anyone that bright and that savvy may determine that those Indians are better off in Charlotte or Salt Lake City or Charleston or anywhere other than right where they play right now.

I'd be sick if this town lost any team. I'd be sicker still if it was the Tribe. But are we getting to the point where the health of the other two franchises might be better served if we eliminate a mouth to feed? Are we simply at a point where the area can't afford and support three teams?

I can see the following when I close my eyes: a post contraction/move apocalypse where bands of 2 and 3 Tribe fans are just starving for fun and excitement. They find it by going down by the lake where scores and scores of glassy-eyed Browns fans are easy pickings because they all just stand around the watering hole drunk out of their minds and mesmerized by the beautiful throwing motion of their perpetually 29 yr old rookie QB and his blazing fast 4th round receiving partner.

Tribe fans are angry. The Weeden watchers are slow, easily fooled and fat.

Carnage ensues.

And it's repeated every, single Sunday in the fall.

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