This was originally supposed to be a two-part piece, with two intertwined athletes featured: #29, Hanford Dixon and #31, Frank Minnifield. Like Lennon and

McCartney or Tango and Cash, you can't talk about the Top Dawg without Mighty Minny.

Certainly Dixon and Minnifield would have been worthy selections in this series. After all, they were one of the best cornerback tandems in NFL history, with seven Pro Bowls and three All-Pro selections between them. More than anyone else, they were responsible for the phenomenon that was the Dawg Pound. They're iconic figures in the sports history of this city, and rightfully so.

Yet after some reflection (and about 1,000 words of a Dixon-Minnifield column that will probably never see the light of day) I decided to go another route.

Andre Thornton wasn't the most decorated man to wear the number 29 in Cleveland. His statistics weren't overly impressive by the standards of a later day. He never distinguished himself in postseason play- not surprising considering he never played in the postseason. He played in an era that longtime Indians fans would like to forget- the 1970's and '80s, when Cleveland was the Siberia of Major League Baseball. And he's been lost in the wake of the conga line of sluggers- Belle, Thome, Ramirez, Hafner- that have worn a Tribe uniform in the three decades since.

But Andre Thornton deserves to be remembered, and not just because he was an excellent player in an era that for the Tribe was anything but. No one overcame tragedy more unthinkable to carve his place in the game. No one represented the Indians or Cleveland with more grace.

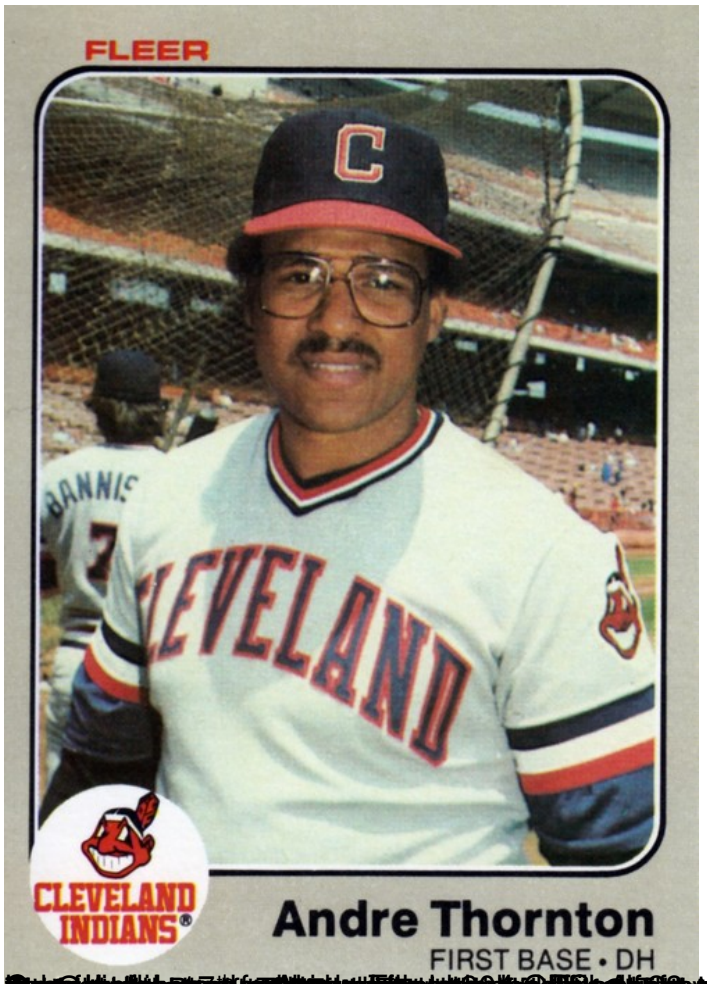
Andre Thornton was a man's man, a true sportsman and a beacon of light at a time of pitch darkness for this city's baseball club.

Andre Thornton took a long and circuitous road to Cleveland. Born in Alabama on August 13th, 1949, he grew up outside of Philadelphia, where he was a three-sport star as well as a renowned local pool shark. Indeed,
Thornton's hometown Phillies signed him right out of a pool hall
as a free agent in 1967, just two weeks prior to his eighteenth birthday.

Thornton spent the next six years in the minors, going from the Phillies to the Braves and finally to the Cubs, where he made his major-league debut in July of 1973. He became a regular at first base the following season and in 1975 hit 18 home runs with 88 walks, displaying the powerful bat and keen eye at the plate that would become so familiar to Tribe fans years down the road. But, as usual on the North Side, the pitching staff was thin and early in the '76 season Thornton was on the move again- this time to Montreal, for starting pitcher Steve Renko and utility man Larry Biitner.

The 1976 Expos were about as bad as it gets, going a nightmarish 55-107. Thornton didn't exactly help matters, batting .191 in a part-time role. In the eyes of the Montreal brass, he wasn't so much a solution as a continuation of the problem. With the team working on a trade to bring Tony Perez on board at first base, Thornton was eminently expendable. Besides the Expos, like the Cubs before them, needed pitching.

The Indians, meanwhile, needed hitting. The Tribe had hit a meager 85 home runs in 1976 and had just traded away the enigmatic George Hendrick, who had accounted for more than a quarter of that total. On December 10th, 1976, Cleveland sent 33-year old right-handed pitcher Jackie Brown to Montreal for Thornton. It would prove to be one of the best under-the-radar transactions in the history of the franchise.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CLEVELAND
CLEVELAND INDIANS
Andre Thornton
FIRST BASE • DH

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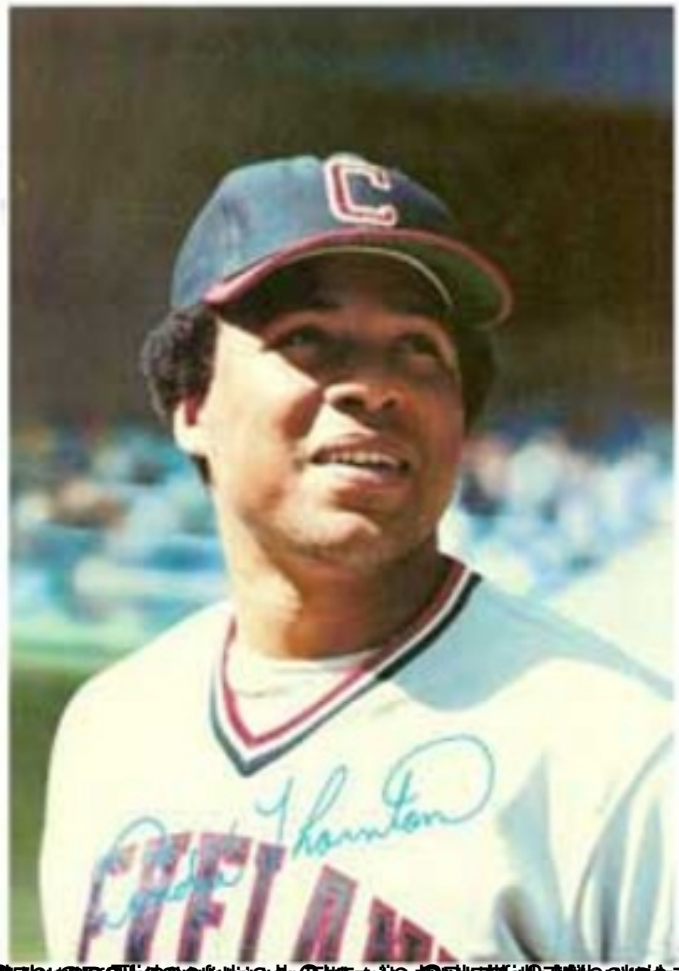

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