This past Sunday, the Plain Dealer released their list of the 25 "Most Powerful People In Northeast Ohio Sports". The list, which is linked inside Gary Benz's latest column, had some notable omissions and odd inclusions. Gary has some serious issues on the PD's rankings, which he debunks in his latest.

Well, at least it was a team effort.

This past Sunday, the Plain Dealer, as only they could do, published their list of “The Most Powerful People in Northeast Ohio Sports.” (see column here) It took the combined efforts of nearly all of the PD’s various beat reporters to compile the list that purports to name the 25 males who most impact area sports because of their prestige, wealth, ability or position. Of course, they claimed that it was the 25 most influential “people” but since no women made the list, no need to pretend that it’s inclusive.

This is not to begrudge their effort to do something interesting during the bye week between the conference championships and the Super Bowl. The Plain Dealer usually demonstrates such little creativity that almost any effort these days is appreciated. But having taken on the effort one wonders what the heck they were thinking.

The fact that not one woman made the list in any capacity should itself have been a story. This week we’ll be bombarded with stories marking the historic meeting of two African-American head coaches in the Super Bowl and the Plain Dealer doesn’t think that the fact that not one woman is on their list warrants anything more than a story of the few women considered and ultimately rejected?

The Plain Dealer notes that Carol Heiss Jenkins, Olympian Diana Munz and even Gloria James and just simply say none made the top 25. Forget the fact that Heiss Jenkins, for one, is a world famous coach who maintains her base in Lakewood, training world class figure skaters. Perhaps the achievements of these skaters, who live and train in Cleveland is viewed as less influential and powerful as, say, Laing Kennedy, Kent State’s athletic director, who finished 23rd on the list. But what of Gloria James? If her son is going to be viewed as the most powerful person in Cleveland sports and the “James Gang,” LeBron’s coterie of hangers on are viewed as the 17th most powerful, then it makes little sense to exclude the one person, his mom, from

the list who continues to exercise the most influence over James, keeping him local and grounded.

But moving beyond the Plain Dealer's gender myopia, it's probably no surprise to most that James finished number one on the list. It seems like an easy and safe choice, but is it warranted? With all due respect to the Chosen One, it is ludicrous to think that the best player on the third favorite Cleveland sports team is the most powerful person in Northeast Ohio sports. James' abilities and accomplishments are hardly in debate. He has a chance to be the best player ever to play for Cleveland in any sport. His love for his hometown of Akron and the fact that he gives back to the community in many, many ways is unquestioned. But the fact remains, the Cavaliers aren't even close to being this town's most popular or influential team.

A case could be made for James in the sense that the only reason the Cavs are at all popular now, in Cleveland and elsewhere, is the fact that James is on the team. In that way, he's had a huge impact. But that impact still must be put into context. To most Cleveland fans, indeed to most sports fans, the NBA is the least interesting of all the major professional sports and James' presence only moves the needle slightly. Its regular season drones on and, thanks to its playoff system, seems mostly irrelevant to most. Neither the NFL's regular season nor baseball's bloated 162-game schedule seems to suffer a similar fate. If James can somehow transcend all of this and raise the status of the Cavs in the minds of fans to be at least on par with the Indians, let alone the Browns, then he truly wouldl be the most powerful person in Cleveland sports. But until that unlikely day presents itself and inspite of his accomplishments to date and the promise to come, he's not even close to being this town's most influential or powerful sports figure.

That honor, unfortunately, goes to Randy Lerner, who clocked in at number two on the PD list. He seems like such an obvious choice that it's hard to believe that even the Plain Dealer messed this up. Lerner is the reluctant but earnest owner who to this point has mostly failed at trying to return the Browns to some semblance of glory. For purposes of this list, however, it's not so much whether he fails or succeeds that matters most, it's the fact that he's in the position to influence that equation the most. Whatever he does is watched more intently by more Clevelanders than the war in Iraq. Need proof? Look how much attention even the tiniest of moves the Browns make gets. Right now you have fans debating the relative merits of each and every assistant coach. It's doubtful that these same fans could name any of the Cavs assistant coaches or the Indians assistants for that matter. The fact that Cleveland sports fans are nearly all consumed with how Lerner wields his power as the Browns owner is what makes him such an obvious choice at the top of any such Cleveland list.

Given that the Plain Dealer completely misunderstands the Cleveland sports market, it's not a surprise that the rest of the list is a mess as well. Dan Gilbert is their number 3 choice You can take the same comments about James and paste them here. But it also seems like the PD put him on the list because one of Gilbert's key goals, according to the PD, apparently is to keep number one happy. That being the case, one wonders why Gilbert wasn't number two, Danny Ferry number three and Mike Brown number four? Instead, the PD placed the Dolans at number four and Phil Savage at number 5. Given the importance of the Browns to this town, Savage probably deserves to be right behind Lerner, then the Dolans at number three with their

chief executive, Mark Shapiro, next. Then, and only then, should anyone talk about James, Gilbert or anyone else associated with James, including head coach Mike Brown. It's at that point James and Gilbert more appropriately fit.

The rest of the list is simply goofy and internally inconsistent. For example, despite his relative importance to the Cavs and James' psyche, coach Mike Brown ranks 13th, behind attorney Fred Nance and Jim Brown. Nance is a fine person and an even finer attorney. But from a Cleveland sports perspective his biggest splash was that he helped preserve the Browns, but that was years ago. His continual presence as a key figure in Cleveland sports is, at best, unclear If someone is going to make the list, his or her accomplishments should both be current an apparent. The PD notes that Nance was a finalist for the job of NFL Commissioner. But that job was destined to go to Roger Godell before even the first interview was held. In any case, that hardly seems a reason to rank Nance at all, let alone number 10. As for Jim Brown, the first person who can cogently explain his current impact on Cleveland sports, please raise your hand. Sure, Brown shows up for games and various other Browns-related events, but if the criteria is current power and influence Brown has none. The PD suggests that Brown is a trusted adviser to Lerner. Even so, no outward manifestation of that role has emerged.

The same sorts of flaws befall the rest of the list as well. But perusing the rest of it for flaws misses the larger point—the list is too long. The impact any of the remaining members of that list have on Cleveland sports is negligible at best, save for Eric Wedge. An interestingly side note is that Wedge is only number 15 on the list, one ahead of the commissioner of the Mid American Conference, which doesn't even have a team in Cleveland. See the point?

Maybe it's because it's the Plain Dealer's own list and humility and/or a massive conflict of interest prevents it, but wouldn't you like to think that the editor of the sports section of the town's only newspaper might be more influential than, say, WTAM's Mike Trivisonno, whose influence is solely a product of his own warped mind and, in any case, seems severely undercut by the simple fact that he spends little if any time anymore even talking about sports. Or perhaps one of the Plain Dealer's sports columnists should have garnered a mention? After all, isn't their job description to help shape public opinion about Cleveland sports? If none of these folks can make the list, that speaks to what we've said all along, relevance and the Plain Dealer is an oxymoron. While that's hardly a surprise, it's just hard to believe that the PD and its columnists have sunk below Lee Reed, Cleveland State's athletic director, who finished last on the list in a tie with Joe Tait.