Michigan. Woody Hayes hated the state so much he wouldn't buy gas there, or so the legend goes. He wouldn't even refer to it by its proper name, calling it "that state up north." However, the pro sports rivalries between the two states have been subdued. Until now. The climate has changed, and Erik Cassano pens an excellent column about it for us this morning.

Michigan.

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Of course, much of Hayes' burning dislike of Michigan centered on maize and blue and the city of Ann Arbor. And that's where most Ohio sports fans aim their venom. Ohio State and Michigan have a ready-made blood feud that gets renewed on the football field every November, usually with a Big Ten title, BCS bowl berth, national championship game berth, or some other heavy hardware on the line.

If you're a Cleveland fan, it's about the only reason you've had to not like Michigan for the past half-century, unless you are into pure, raw jealousy over the sports scenes in each state's largest metropolitan area. The pro sports teams of Cleveland and Detroit have taken divergent paths. No one needs to tell anyone on this side of the state line who took the low road.

It's not just the eight pro sports titles Detroit has won since Cleveland's last in 1964. It's the fact that, for the most part, Cleveland hasn't even been there to challenge Detroit. And on the lone occasion a Cleveland team -- the Indians -- improved to the point that it could vie for a title, its Detroit counterpart was mired in

a 15-year stretch of miserable baseball.

In short, when it comes to pro sports, Cleveland and Detroit have largely been like ships passing in the night.

Sure, there were the four NFL title games the Lions and Browns played in the '50s, with the Lions winning three, but that's like finding the building blocks for a rivalry in the 1908 Cleveland-Detroit AL pennant race, in which the Tigers edged the Naps by a half-game. Most people old enough to remember that are dead. You can look it up.

When the Pistons were good enough to win it all in 1989, the Cavs were only good enough to bother them, not knock them off. Then a man named Jordan got in the way of a possible
Cavs
-Pistons playoff series with a rather famous jumper over Craig
Ehlo
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Hockey ... should I even bring this up? The Red Wings are one of the Original Six, with a rich history that includes Gordie Howe as the centerpiece. Cleveland had one of the premier minor league hockey teams -- the AHL Barons -- until 1973, but since then, our pro hockey scene has been a fractured mess that included a two-year tango with an NHL team that was on the verge of bankruptcy, and had to be merged with the Minnesota North Stars to avoid folding.

So, as a Cleveland fan, you can be excused if all this Cleveland-Detroit rivalry stuff is rather new to you. But the flames are being fanned, aren't they? You are starting to really not like losing to Detroit.

With the Cavs trailing the Pistons in a playoff series for the second straight year, you are starting to grind your teeth when you see Rasheed Wallace's huge mouth and goofy grin. You are starting to feel the bile welling in your esophagus when you hear the talking heads in the national media constantly stroke the egos of the Piston players, talk about how they embody the concept of "team" and how Joe
Dumars
is a genius architect who gleaned mismatched parts to put together a champion.

You want to throw the remote at the TV when Rip Hamilton tells Ahmad Rashad how the Pistons need to win a title for C-Webb and Antonio McDyess, because they weren't there the last time Detroit won it all, way back in '04. (Man! 2004? Might need to dust some cobwebs off that trophy pretty soon.)

Your anti-Michigan reflexes were tested when you had to watch Jim Leyland, he of the store-bought 1997 Marlins, lead the Tigers out of nowhere and into the World Series last year. You felt some measure of satisfaction watching the Tigers implode against the Cardinals, just so you wouldn't have to watch Leyland -- an Ohio turncoat, no less -- win another championship.

Now the Indians and Tigers are locked in what should be a season-long duel atop the AL Central. Two young, pitching-based teams trying to figure out how to beat each other, with each loss adding another layer of resentment for one side or the other.

The centerpiece of the Ohio-Michigan rivalry will always occur on the last weekend of the Big Ten football season, but the Border War is gaining more dimensions than ever before. The Pistons are no longer just another opponent from a nearby city. An Indians-Tigers game is no longer just another lazy evening at the ballpark. Now, we play to beat these guys.

With the Browns unable to locate the same competitive zip code as the Steelers and Ravens, with the combination of an unbalanced schedule and interleague play choking the Tribe's rivalries with the Yankees and Red Sox, Detroit sports is filling the us-against-them void that Clevelanders seem to crave.

They're more established. They're bigger. They have many more rings. And they're just across the border. Heck, you probably know some of their fans. They might even be in your family, which only makes it more personal.

Welcome to Ohio vs. Michigan, just as the founding fathers envisioned it: Heated, passionate, and now, all-too-familiar.