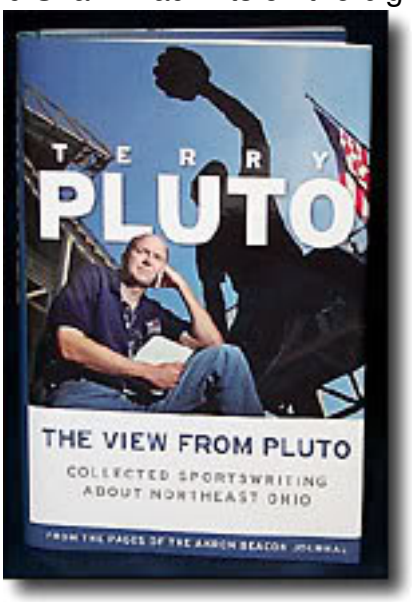
Here's what Gary Benz thinks about Terry Pluto leaving the Akron Beacon Journal for the Plain Dealer: good news for readers of the Plain Dealer, bad news for readers of the Beacon Journal. Oh yea, really bad news for Bill Livingston and Bud Shaw. Paul hits on the big news in the Cleveland sports media in his latest effort for us.



Here’s what I think about Terry Pluto leaving the Akron Beacon Journal for the Plain Dealer: good news for readers of the Plain Dealer, bad news for readers of the Beacon Journal. Oh yea, really bad news for Bill Livingston and Bud Shaw.

Unable to restore credibility organically, the Plain Dealer went out and bought some by its re-acquisition of one of the most respected sportswriters anywhere. Nothing wrong with that and, in fact, much to applaud. At least the Plain Dealer recognized the hole it needed to fill and went about filling it in a meaningful way. If only Indians GM Mark Shapiro could accomplish the same thing. Put it this way, the re-hiring of Pluto is more like the Detroit Tigers filling a need in their lineup by signing Gary Sheffield and less like the Indians filling a need in their lineup by signing Trot Nixon.

While Pluto, Livingston and Shaw will never challenge the heyday of the Plain Dealer when it had Hal Lebovitz, Russ Schneider and Chuck Heaton, the hiring of Pluto does at least give folks a reason to read the Plain Dealer sports pages again. Certainly that wasn’t happening with either Livingston or Shaw.

The truth of the matter is that the reason fans read sites like this is that we offer

the kind of refreshing perspective that just isn't offered very much locally anymore. We don't feel as constrained by the established conventions of the profession, meaning that we don't have as great an issue bringing a sense of urgency to our views.

Livingston, for example, seems much more concerned with the well-turned phrase than with thoughtful insight or analysis. His opinions are safe, established and often come well after others, including the writers on this site, have weighed in. The next time he puts his neck on the line with an opinion will be the first time.

Shaw just seems lost these days not knowing what to write anymore. Take for example, his column a few days ago about Tiger Woods. Demonstrating virtually no understanding of the game or those who play it or it's history pre-Woods, Shaw simultaneously observed that Jack Nicklaus faced greater players in his "tight competition circle" (whatever the heck that means) while also saying that Woods' accomplishments, particularly in majors, is all the more impressive because he's playing against a field of far greater depth. Huh?

In professional golf, greatness tends to be measured by what a player accomplishes under the most stringent tests, not what he does in the Greater Greensboro Open. When Nicklaus was in his prime so too were some of the greatest players in the history of the game. If Nicklaus wasn't winning the majors, they were. In the case of Woods, that just isn't true. Among Woods' contemporaries are some Hall of Famers to be sure, but virtually since the day Woods' arrived, no one has stepped up on a consistent basis to challenge him the way Lee Trevino, Gary Player or Tom Watson challenged Nicklaus. There are a number of good players around today, but the gap between them and Woods is far greater than the gap between Nicklaus and his counterparts. That's just a fact and Shaw just casually concluding, without even bothering to back it up, that these days there is greater depth, is at least uninformed and at most lazy.

What Pluto brings to the mix is, in part, what attracts readers to this site. He's a writer who is also a fan and isn't afraid to offer that confession. He wants the local

teams to do well and is as frustrated as anyone when they don't. His ability to offer an objective view of why things went wrong is his particular talent because when he does offer that view, it has context.

This isn't to repeat the oft-repeated criticism of Livingston in particular that he is simply a carpetbagger. Livingston has been in the community for years now and at some point the statute of limitations expires on holding it against him that he's not from here. Instead, the bigger issue with both Livingston and Shaw is that they don't appear to be fans of much of anything or anyone. Their observations thus lack a critical element that comes through in virtually everything Pluto writes—passion. That's why the Shaw column on Woods seemed particularly empty.

As for the Beacon Journal, it may not be time to actually cancel that subscription, but that moment is growing ever closer. It's no secret that the newspaper business, in general, is struggling. But as one of the flagship papers in the Knight-Ridder chain, the Beacon Journal, to those who knew better, always ran circles around the Plain Dealer. But since its sale and the subsequent cutbacks, it is a shell of its former self. There is still talent there, in particular Brian Windhorst who covers the Cavs, but the departure of Pluto is a serious blow to a newspaper that has been trying to convince its community that it is still relevant even as its content begins to resemble that of a newsletter.

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No sooner did we run my column demonstrating that the Indians can't score runs without hitting home runs than the Indians went out and proved that point again, this time against Detroit on Tuesday night. Grady Sizemore's two-run home run did nothing to awake the rest of the lineup and, not surprisingly, the Indians didn't otherwise score. The Indians also proved, again, that they can't play small ball when necessary. In the ninth inning, manager Eric Wedge didn't even have Jhonny Peralta attempt to bunt Chris Gomez over to third. Wedge knew that Peralta didn't have that skill, raising the question as to who exactly is at fault for

that. But in any event, lacking such skills, the team faced what was surely the insurmountable task of getting a hit with a runner in scoring position. Predictably, three straight strike outs ensued. Just as predictably, the Tigers scored four runs in the top of the 10th, although one would have been plenty and another loss was booked.

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As the Indians struggles continue, both Wedge and GM Mark Shapiro in recent days have resorted to the well worn “if you would have told us in spring training that come the middle of August we’d be in first place, we’d have taken that” approach. More often than not, that’s the tact of the truly desperate. While meant as a reality check to the increasingly frustrated, it contains more than a whiff of the suggestion that somehow the Indians have overachieved to this point and that the fans should be grateful. But in truth, most fans did figure that come the middle of August the Indians would be in first place or at least close to it. Any fans who believed otherwise did so figuring that Wedge would find a way to get this team to underachieve instead of play up to expectations. Trying to convince either group that despite all the problems they should be happy never works and won’t work here.

In some ways what Wedge and Shapiro are really saying is that fans aren’t smart enough to keep the present skid in perspective. Maybe. But fans are smart enough to know that the current struggles seem institutionalized at this point and that the chances are dwindling that the team will pull out of this death spiral anytime soon and management is powerless to stop it. In fact, I’ll go as far as to say that the fans are smart enough to take the same critical look at the lineup that surely both Wedge and Shapiro are doing and realize that offensively, anyway, we

all overestimated its abilities.

And speaking of Wedge, the criticism of him grows louder with each loss but for those calling for his scalp, here's where perspective would be more useful. It's not Wedge's fault, for example, that Trot Nixon is on this team. He can only play those whom Shapiro has given him. If Wedge were being completely honest, he should be saying "if I told you that come the middle of August we'd be in first place with a bullpen made up of Aaron Fultz, Jensen Lewis, Tom Mastny and Edward Mujica and an outfield in which both Trot Nixon and Kenny Lofton have more or less become the regulars, you would have taken it." Put that way, he's probably right.

Finally, it seems that Wedge just isn't fiery enough for the talk show callers. As Rome continues to burn, Wedge appears to some like Kevin Bacon's character near the end of "Animal House" fruitlessly imploring the crowd to "remain calm" because "all is well." But if all it took to turn this team around was to peel back Peralta's scalp because he fell asleep on the base paths last Sunday or because he can't lay down a simple bunt, I'm sure Wedge would have done just that. You can't yell someone into competency. Still, it would be nice to have heard that on at least one or two occasions lately Wedge turned over the tables in the locker room holding post-game food spread, if not to make us feel better than at least for him. If he holds his emotions in check much longer, Joel Skinner will be back coaching this team on an interim basis while Wedge recuperates from the inevitable stroke.