In Part II of his epic tale of what it means to be a Cleveland fan, Buff hits on moving from Akron to Virginia to Austin, Red Right 88, Earnest Byner, and the art of coping with a consistent stream of failure from the teams he loves. Buff calls it The Cleveland Experience, and in this excellent read, does a good job of putting the range of emotions we all feel as fans into words. The final installment of this three part piece will post on in the next couple days. *Click here to read Part I ...*

Part of the attraction of sports to me is the establishment of a closed system with specific rules and measurable outcomes. This isn't necessarily typical of sports fans, but it's one of the reasons I always gravitated more to baseball than other sports. I'll watch nearly any sporting event and will certainly read the whole sports section, but it's a lot easier for me to get deeply involved in baseball. The fact that baseball has readily-available statistics that are easy to interpret helps a lot, and a lot of statistical work has been developed over the past one or two decades that makes it even more interesting from a systemic point of view. Watching an individual football or basketball game can be as or even more interesting at the time, but baseball holds more fascination in terms of following over time and sussing out trends. It's also easier to project what would happen were a player to change teams, because his performance is a lot more independent of his team than it is in other sports.

My sister and I moved from Akron to the Virginia side of suburban D.C. after my parents divorced. Looking back, I think I held onto my Cleveland fandom more as an effort to retain a piece of my old life than out of any great passion. I had just turned 12, so, practically speaking, I hadn't made any tremendous emotional investment in the uniformly uninspiring Cleveland franchises to that point. However, it was something that set me apart from my new friends in Springfield, Virginia, and reminded me of my old friends in Akron.

Austin, Texas doesn't have any major professional sports franchises, unless you count the University of Texas. (Snide observers have argued that UT's sports programs are more profitable than most professional franchises). Everyone is inundated with Texas Longhorn sports more or less year 'round, as the football and baseball programs returned to national prominence after short down periods and Rick Barnes has raised the level of basketball play at UT to a level not seen since teams with losing records made the eight-team NCAA tournament. In a state with rabid high school football fans, the high school football is generally mediocre, but no one is neutral on the subject of the Longhorns. Graduates from other Texas universities (most notably Texas A&M) abound in Austin, but it's certainly a Horn town.

We have an Arena Football team, a sub-minor-league hockey team, and a AAA franchise in neighboring Round Rock. The Round Rock Express is actually a model minor-league franchise, leading the AA Texas League in attendance a couple years running before moving to the AAA Pacific Coast (?!) League. The stadium is beautiful (financed in part by Austin resident Michael Dell of Dell Computers: the field bears his name) and 5-digit crowds are the norm, meaning that the minor-league Express routinely outdraws the Indians of my childhood. One of the great features of the field is that families can buy "berm seating" for the sloped hills behind the left and right field fences, where you lay out a blanket, buy snacks, and let the children run and yell for three hours without being told to sit down or watch out or be quiet. Well, the children are frequently told by their parents to stop running into the wall and each other, but one gets the impression that this does not differ significantly from what would happen if they weren't at the game.

We went to a game a few years ago before my daughter was born, and the five-year-old Chris had a good time independent of a baseball game being played in close proximity. (The Dell Diamond features a playground back beyond the berm seating, and any outdoor activity involving hot dogs and soda is probably going to be fun.) Every now and then he would look at the field and enjoyed yelling "Charge!" with the rest of the fans, but baseball itself held little interest. This was neither surprising nor discouraging.

We went last month to another game on Fireworks Friday. Now that Chris has taken an interest in baseball, I was looking forward to explaining all those Dad Things before the window closed, either because he found a new interest or becomes old enough to realize that Dad Knows Nothing. (Twelve-year-old Sloan

approaches this age with increasing rapidity.) I pointed out Dave Burba and Tom Martin, who used to pitch for Cleveland. "Dave Burba has played with Barry Bonds, Alex Rodriguez, Jim Thome, and Omar Vizquel," I point out to Chris. "If he gets called up to the Astros, he may finish his career having played with as many as ten Hall of Famers."

"Uh huh. May I have a Sprite?" Chris asks.

"When did you become twelve?" I ask.

While the Indians were floundering their way through the eighties, the Browns actually turned into an enjoyable football team to watch. The seventies were worse than bad, in that the team was not entirely terrible, but it was also rarely interesting. When Brian Sipe took over for Mike Phipps and Sam Rutigliano decided to hitch the team's wagon to Sipe's ability to make things happen (good or bad,) the Browns actually wrested the AFC Central from the dynastic Steelers and "Luv Ya Blue" Bum Phillips Oilers. On a typical nine thousand below zero Cleveland winter day, the Browns hosted the Oakland Raiders and played then more or less evenly. The big difference in the game was that Oakland made both their extra points, and Cleveland's straight-on kicker Don Cockroft (who in earlier years even doubled as punter) had managed to miss one. Trailing 14-12 in the last minute, Sipe rolled left and lofted a poorly-thrown ball toward Ozzie Newsome in the end zone, where it was intercepted. Could Cockroft have made a field goal? Could Sipe and simply run out of bounds? Could jamming a sharp stick in one's eye feel worse? Watching in my den in Springfield, it was the first significant Browns game I'd seen, and it had been intensely painful. (I was too young to have seen the Vikings beat the Browns for the right to lose the Super Bowl)

Sipe had apparently used the last of his pixie dust or had Old Nick call in the loan or whatever, because the Browns lapsed back into the Browns for another half decade until a smart kid out of the University of Miami from Boardman, Ohio played the system to his advantage and wheedled his way onto the Browns. Bernie Kosar wasn't exactly an overnight success, but it wasn't long before the Browns were back in the playoffs, and they were even actually good.

Home from grad school for the Christmas break, I went to a friend's house, ostensibly to watch the Redskins play the Giants in the NFC Championship game. While the large group watched the pregame (these were the Lawrence Taylor Giants: the game was a foregone conclusion, although I did not have the heart to tell my friend, a rabid Skins fan), I snuck upstairs to watch the end of the AFC Championship game. Cleveland led the Denver Broncos 20-13 with only minutes left. This would be the first time a major Cleveland sports franchise would even get to PLAY in the championship game, much less win. (Like most Cleveland sports fans, we did not consider the Major Indoor Soccer League Cleveland Crunch's titles to really "count.")

The Browns did not win. The Browns not only did not win, they lost in what can only be described as "excruciating fashion." As the Redskins were blown out by the Giants, I envied my Skins fan friends.

The Browns made it back the next year. They did not win. I had run out of eyes and sharp sticks. A pattern was emerging.

Everyone gets frustrated. Life is frustrating. And yet, many of us do frustrating things on purpose, actively seeking them out because they provide us with something when they're not actively frustrating us. We have jobs, we have bills, we have children, and we still do things that frustrate us more. On purpose. Often paying money to do them. It could be argued that we are all subconsciously Cleveland Fans.

My family likes to tell the story of the year when I was very young when I dealt with frustration by biting things, notably doorknobs. The feeling would be so strong that something simple like yelling or punching pillows or jumping up and down would not be enough to expel its intensity: somehow, focusing all the strength of the feeling through my teeth and jaw seemed like the most efficient way of channeling the power out of my body. Woe be it to the doorknob which chose to impede my progress tearing through the house.

I started taking piano lessons when I was young, six or seven, and enjoyed playing very much. I still do, although with a wife and three children in a smallish

house, do it infrequently any more. The problem with learning to play the piano is that one is *learning* to play the piano: that is to say, by definition, you *can't* play the piano. Later, you
can
play the piano, but you can't play
this
on the piano. That is why you are
taking lessons
. With few exceptions, you need to
practice
so that you can
develop
the skill to play what you are trying to play.

It can be frustrating.

Normally, you can make enough progress so that the act of practicing is something you can enjoy, or at least hear and feel tangible improvement. You can tell you're getting better, and it feels more automatic, so it's an enjoyable activity. The logical part of your brain tells you it's perfectly natural to make mistakes while you're learning to play something, and that it's okay. You work on the parts that are hard, and eventually you get better at them. The logical part of your brain is not always in charge, unfortunately. There were a number of times (my mother would know better, unless the numbers got too high to count) where I would very very very very very much want to play a particular passage correctly, would not, and would become upset. It is hard to play a passage properly when you are upset. In fact, it is much easier to make another mistake when repeating a difficult passage while very upset. This would make me more upset. However, I would not stop until I played the passage correctly. Our piano, as it turned out, proved to be very durable.

This kind of behavior extended to other things I tried, but not everything. In retrospect, I think it had something to do with an internal measurement I'd make about whether I ought to be able to be successful or not: hitting a Wiffle ball was something I *had* to be able to do, but running a whole mile was not. Doing flashcard math problems faster than anyone else was compelling, but neat handwriting or winning the spelling bee was not. It's hard to qualify what made a task "compelling," possibly because there's no discernable pattern or logic behind it. It's entirely possible that had I been born in 1996 instead of 1964, I

would have been diagnosed with High Functioning Autism (another catch-all blob on the plane) myself. I learned or developed different coping mechanisms as I grew older.

For Chris, there is no discernable pattern because it applies to just about everything, and the size of his coping skill set was, for a long time, exactly zero. A practice spelling test was a failure when only 9 of 10 were correct. A trivial task like dropping a ball or having Kirby the video game puffball not time a jump properly erased any past successes and precluded any future ones. He, too, is learning coping mechanisms.

But it is very, very hard.

Part III posts on Tuesday.