Lex Luthor and the Joker shared a wicked grin as they basked in the glow of their successful evil plan that thwarted their arch-nemeses and allowed them to finally

take over the world.

But suddenly, the far wall of their secret hideout exploded, and through the smoke and shrapnel, Luthor and the Joker saw the silhouettes of their destruction.

First, Bob Golic stepped into the room with his gargantuan arms raised in triumph and his black heart thumping between the “7” and the “9” on his Cleveland Browns jersey. As he lifted Luthor up into the air, Hot Rod Williams and Joe Carter emerged from the dusty shadows to corner the Joker. Hot Rod enveloped the clown prince of crime with his massive right arm – still clutching a basketball in mid-rebound – while Joe Carter beat the white-faced maniac into submission with his bat.

Justice had been served thanks to three Cleveland athletes who had succeeded where Batman, Robin, and yes, even Superman had failed.

While this may seem like something that could only happen in a feverish dream world after eating a Totino’s frozen pizza right before bed, it was – for a brief period in the late 1980s – not only possible, but may have actually played out in the little cranny between the couch and the

Christmas tree in my parents' living room.

This was the majesty and wonder of Kenner's Starting Lineup action figures.

It was such a perfect idea, it was hard to believe it took as long as it did to become reality, kind of like democracy or the McGriddle. America was well over 200 years old before action figures were finally made of modern-day professional athletes in 1988. And not just of superstars like Magic Johnson and Joe Montana, but roughly four athletes for every team – Major League Baseball, the NFL, and the NBA.

Adding to the late-night-Totino's-nightmare feel of the whole thing, the concept was the brainchild of former Bengals punter Pat McInally, who undoubtedly wound up making more money off little plastic toys than he ever did on the football field. So as it turns out, something good actually did come out of Cincinnati other than Skyline Chili and the Isley Brothers.

I can remember my heart leaping when I first heard about Starting Lineup. I just couldn't wrap my head around the notion that there were going to be action figures of Browns players. It was both incomprehensible and exhilarating, as if Kenner were rolling out a line of toys based on my grandparents. And I vowed to collect them all.

Of course, once the figures actually hit the streets, my exuberance faded. Not because they weren't quality products or Kenner didn't select desirable players, but rather because they didn't put the hay down where the goats could get it.

I'm sure somewhere, in a stuffy boardroom with stale danishes on the table, some feathered-haired, Reagan-loving corporate dingleberries plotted some well-thought-out regionalism in the placement of the figures. Yet I spent a good chunk of the late 1980s wandering from Kmart to Kmart hoping to find figures from Cleveland teams and instead kept coming across Ken Oberkfell and Tim Krumrie.

ebay wasn't even a glint in somebody's late-night Totino's pizza yet, so you were pretty much stuck with whatever you could find in the aisles of a Kmart or, if you lived somewhere awesome,

a Gold Circle, Best, Kiddie City, or Children's Palace.

Luckily, that first Christmas of the Starting Lineup era, somebody managed to score me a Bob Golic, Ozzie Newsome, and Kevin Mack. Unfortunately, as I

unwrapped these treasures on Christmas Eve just a couple hours after the Browns had lost the 1988 AFC Wild Card Game to Houston, little did I know that Golic would never again play for the Browns, Mack was about to be arrested for drug possession, and the Wizard of Oz only had three touchdowns left in those glorious molded plastic hands.

Not to say I was disappointed, but as I ripped open the green-and-white box and held these beloved five-inch-tall athletes in my hands for the first time, I was underwhelmed by the physical resemblance. Ozzie Newsome looked like *Reading Rainbow*'s LeVar Burton. For some reason, Kevin Mack had a little smile on his face that reminded me of Theo from *The Cosby Show*, and bearded, jovial Bob Golic looked more like singer/songwriter Roger Whitaker than a star nose tackle.

But what the hell. You'd put the little kidney stone-sized helmets on - painted with amazing detail, presumably by small children in a sweatshop in Bangladesh - and it didn't matter. The jersey numbers were right and best of all, the players' names were across the back.

Those three guys represented the majority of the initial five-player Browns' set. Brian Brennan – awww, remember him? – and Bernie Kosar (natch) were the others. It would have been epic to have found a Brian Brennan (whose figure looked a little like Kirk Cameron), but it never actually happened. (And probably still won't, since they're going for about $30 on ebay right now.)

While finding a Brian Brennan would have been memorable, landing a Bernie Kosar would have been life-altering. Getting a Bernie Starting Lineup figure at that time was like trying to get a Golden Ticket to Willy Wonka's chocolate factory: there were only about five, and they were scattered all over the world. My guess is that today there's a goat farmer in Kazakhstan with one who still thinks it's supposed to be actor Albert Brooks.

The Browns, the toast of the town around this time, were obviously the most popular of Cleveland's original Starting Lineup batch. But they weren't the only ones available. There were four Cavs and – dig it – ***five*** Indians. But I learned that even these were hard to find – or more specifically, the ones you wanted were hard to find. The ones you didn't care about were everywhere.

For example, no matter what store you went into or where it was located - whether in Cleveland or Beaufort, South Carolina - there would always be about eight Pat Tablers. Two reasons: one, he was traded by the Indians to Kansas City just as the figures hit the stands. And two, he was Pat Tabler.

I went to a game at old Riverfront Stadium in 1989 and they gave away Reds Startling Lineup figures to all the kids in attendance in the hopes of distracting them from the fact that Pete Rose had laid down money on the outcome of the game.

Though not a Reds fan, I was hoping for either an Eric Davis or a Buddy Bell. Instead, fitting in with the entire Starting Lineup experience, I got Kal Daniels, whose career highlight was having a Starting Lineup figure made. Not unlike most of the first Indians who had figures made in their likeness.

That first round of Tribe Staring Lineup guys really reflected the state of the franchise. Within a year, four of those five players – considered by Kenner to be the most popular on the team – were no longer in Cleveland. Only Cory Snyder – whose figure looked like King Friday the 13th from the Land of Make-Believe – remained, but even then, only for another year, and then he was thrown into the clearance aisle with his traded teammates and a bunch of ThunderCats toys.

The Cavs' quartet on the other hand, was far more appealing: Ron Harper, Mark Price, Brad Daugherty, and Hot Rod Williams. All young, all drafted by the Cavs just a few years before, and all with their socks pulled up to their knees, rocking it Michael Cooper-style. To paraphrase sweet, sweet Nick Gilbert – still nine years away from being conceived at this point – there was literally nothing not to like.

Plus, Mark Price was the one Starting Lineup figure that actually looked like himself - which says less about Kenner's attention to detail than it does about Price's timeless hairstyle and facial structure.

Price was lucky enough to have been molded in a classic pose of firing up a jump shot. With several of the players' poses, particularly the NBA players, it was never quite clear what they were doing. They varied from somewhat natural-looking to something you'd see on a poster

taped to a doctor's office wall showing you how to perform a scoliosis exam.

While Brad Daugherty was leaning like a telephone pole trying to grab a rebound, Ron Harper was awkwardly holding the ball in front of his groin as if frozen in mid-turnover. Almost certainly because he's distracted by the fact he was made to look like John Shaft.

But it could have been far worse. I remember Kenner tried to make Boomer Esiason look like he was leaning down to take a snap from center. But instead it looked like he was pooping while holding a football, an image I thoroughly enjoyed at the time.

Later, once the target audience switched from 12-year-olds to doughy 30-somethings who would buy 15 figures at a time and never take them out of the package, you started to see some more creative poses – Kenny Lofton leaping over the fence to make a catch, Albert Belle assaulting a reporter, Shawn Kemp taking a paternity test, Tim Couch crying in public.

Yes indeed, in the brand's dying days in the early 2000s, there was a Tim Couch Starting Lineup figure. And a Courtney Brown. And a Tyrone Hill. And oh, Mother of Christ, a Jaret Wright.

I don't imagine there were many kids actually playing with or getting excited about Starting Lineup figures by that point. Plus, by the time Starting Lineup finally bit

the dust in 2001, the internet had taken all the fun out of the hunt. If you wanted a Bernie Kosar, you walked four feet over to your computer and bought him. You didn't have to endure

months of finding nothing but Tony Casillas or Kent Hrbek.

I’m sure I’m not the only one who has fond memories of those little plastic guys. Even after they were packed away with all the Star Wars and He-Man crap that littered my youth, they held a special place in my heart.

For a lot of kids of the ‘80s and ‘90s, the Starting Lineup universe smashed together two worlds that had previously been disparate - the colorful role-playing of action figures with an appreciation for sports one level of maturity beyond it.

Then and now, they were meaningful, yet just juvenile enough to remind us that following sports can and should be fun.

Not bad for five inches of plastic.