Have injuries in the past 12 months hit Cleveland's pro athletes harder than they've hit any other city's? (Not that they're an excuse for the Cavaliers' incredibly bad record, or the Indians' June swoon, or the Browns' rather disappointing start.) But golly…

If it's not **Travis Hafner** and **Grady Sizemore** seeing limited playing time with the Indians, it's the Browns' **Tony Pashos** missing games with weak ankles, or **Eric Steinbach** undergoing surgery on his back, or **Peyton Hillis** coming down with strep throat. Or it's former Tribe pitcher **Adam Miller**'s finger or **Carlos Carrasco**'s elbow. Not to mention Cavaliers **Andy Varejao** (torn ankle tendon) and **Antawn Jamison** (broken finger).

Ugliest Injuries

Injuries have a long and storied history in the three major professional sports. Most memorable:

>> During a 1978 NFL preseason game, New England receiver **Darryl Stingley** was hit by Raiders defensive back Jack Tatum, breaking two cervical vertebrae. Stingley spent the rest of his life as a quadriplegic, passing away at age 56 as a result of that fateful hit 29 years earlier.

>> Talk about ugly…the second-most memorable injury occurred in 1985 during a televised Monday Night Football game when Giants linebacker Lawrence Taylor snapped Washington quarterback **Joe Theismann**'s leg. Thanks to about a dozen TV cameras and slow-mo instant replay, millions of NFL fans saw the injury occur from all angles, and the ugly fracture abruptly ended Theismann's playing career.

Neither involved Cleveland players. But…

Clevelanders Off the Field

Historically, injuries are just as likely to occur off the field as on, and local athletes, not surprisingly, rate high on that list.

>> The most memorable such injury—at least as far as Cleveland fans are concerned—occurred in May, 2005, when Browns tight end **Kellen Winslow Jr.** flew off his Suzuki GSX-R750 motorcycle at about 35 mph. He suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee and was placed on the PUP list for the entire season. A subsequent six-week staph infection didn't help the situation.

>> Back when players needed off-season jobs to supplement their NFL income, promising young defensive back **Don Fleming**, 26, was electrocuted near Orlando during the summer. He

was operating a crane on a construction site when its boom brushed an overhead 12,000-volt high-tension electrical wire. Attempts to revive him at the hospital failed, and the Browns mourned him for the entire 1963 season.

>> Other off-the-field injuries can be, shall we say, “fluke” or “eclectic”—like that of former Indian outfielder **Glenallen Hill**, who somehow managed to survive 13 major-league seasons. One night, during a dream about spiders (which scared the bejesus out of him), he tumbled off his couch and through a glass table. That bit of derring-do doubtless rivals football’s
Plaxico Burress
(who shot himself in the leg) as one of the most absurd sports injuries of all time.

Memorable Performances

Not all injuries sideline pro athletes, many of whom have pain thresholds that are off the charts. Four instances of players who overcame their maladies to stun the sporting world and become part of sports lore:

1) In Game Seven of the 1970 NBA Finals, Knicks captain **Willis Reed** made a bravura appearance despite a torn thigh muscle that had kept him out of Game Six. Starting the deciding game, he scored the Knicks' first two field goals on his first two shot attempts (his only points of the game), but his presence inspired his teammates and the entire hometown crowd. The Knicks beat the Lakers 113–99, giving New York City its first NBA title. Years later, the moment Reed walked onto the court was voted the greatest moment in the history of Madison Square Garden.

2) **Kirk Gibson** hit a limp-off home run off Oakland’s Dennis Eckersley in Game One of the 1988 World Series. With the Dodgers trailing 4–3, a runner on first and two out in the ninth, Gibson, hobbled by a pulled left hamstring and a swollen right knee, was inserted by manager Tommy Lasorda as a pinch-hitter. Gibson, using pure upper-body strength, launched a 3-2 pitch over the right-field fence. He limped around the bases, the Dodgers won the game—and, eventually, the Series.

3) In 2004, Boston’s **Curt Schilling** pitched (and won) Game Two of the World Series against the St. Louis Cardinals. In both the ALCS and the WS, he had to have the tendon in his right

ankle stabilized via what has become known as the Schilling Tendon Procedure. Schilling's sock quickly became soaked with blood, but he still managed to pitch seven strong innings, giving up one run on four hits and striking out four. The bloody sock was placed in the Baseball Hall of Fame after Boston beat the Cards.

4) In 1988, Detroit's **Isiah Thomas** made perhaps his most self-defining appearance in the NBA Finals against the Lakers. In Game Six, he severely sprained his ankle. Yet, while hobbling and in obvious pain, he ended up scoring 25 points in a single quarter, an NBA Finals record.

Keep On Truckin'?

Those stories of athletes overcoming injuries to not merely play but excel are fast becoming history. Bob Feller had an amazing capacity to pitch 300 innings every summer, but he was facing hitters who spent the off-season selling vacuum cleaners. Today's athletes work out year-round, using only the most modern training equipment. Every one is a finely tuned machine—as they must be. When you've got 350-pound bodies colliding on the gridiron, Shaq-tastic bodies banging under the NBA boards, and chiseled Adonises hitting guided missiles from foul pole to foul pole, even a hangnail can affect not only an individual's performance but the outcome of an entire game. That little old hangnail ultimately can mean making the playoffs or not making the playoffs. Indeed, the difference between winning and losing in the "bigs" is sometimes just that fine.

Is it any wonder, then, that Pashos cannot be expected to block lightning-fast defensive ends with a pair of injured ankles, or that Pronk's sore shoulder steals 20 homes runs during the course of a season, or that Grady's achy knees limit his production?

No. The Reed-Gibson-Schilling-Thomas stories are the exception, not the rule. Much as we sometimes liken pro athletes to The Incredible Hulk, they are, in the final analysis, more like us—only human.