T

he Empire Strikes Back, the masterpiece of the Star Wars double-trilogy, begins its trademark opening crawl with a simple, yet perfect statement for the state of the far, far away galaxy we're about to re-enter: "It is a dark time for the Rebellion."

Cleveland may not be the location of the Rebel Alliance's latest secret base, but we're going through our own dark time these days. And I don't mean post-1964 - the darkness is much more immediate and the timeframe is much more specific.

The best way to really examine how bad things are at the moment for Cleveland sports is to look at it cycle-by-cycle.

What's that mean? Glad you asked.

A sports "cycle" mirrors the cycle of the four seasons of nature themselves. It starts, fittingly, with the symbolic beginning of baseball season and the return of life to our barren landscape. Baseball then concludes just as football season gets going, and halfway through that, basketball begins and takes you to the following spring, when baseball starts once again.

And this definition fits Cleveland (and most good sports cities) well, since it also follows the order in which its respective teams entered the fans' consciousness: first the Indians, then the Browns, then the Cavaliers. (And for a hot second in the mid-1970s, the NHL Barons.)

Of course, a city can only truly go through a sports cycle if it has a team in at least three leagues: Major League Baseball, the NFL, and either the NBA or NHL. Cycle talk in Cincinnati or Baltimore or even Los Angeles is meaningless. For all their Pete Roses and stolen NFL franchises and Rodney King riots, they don't qualify.

The really poetic aspect of a sports cycle is that it means on any given day of the year, your city has at least one team in the middle of a season. That's both perverse and somewhat reassuring. Like The Weather Channel or a 24-hour gas station...it's just nice to know it's there if you need it.

Thus, with the Cavs frantically pissing away the remainder of their slapdash schedule, we are on the brink of the conclusion of one sports cycle and the commencement of a new one.

Not surprisingly, the 2011-12 cycle has been less than inspiring for Cleveland's teams, though - thanks to the Indians' resurgence and the Cavs' gradual growth process - a decided improvement over 2010-11. Barring a complete collapse by the Cavaliers over the next six weeks, the 2011-12 cycle will rank in the bottom half but still quite a few notches above the worst we've ever seen.

Which is really pathetic, when you stop and think about it.

You could simplify things by containing each cycle within a single calendar year, but that gets messy. You'd have to divide it so that each cycle would have portions of two Cavs' seasons. Thus, by keeping each Cavs' season intact, a cycle becomes like a school year: 2011-12, 1987-88, etc.

Cleveland's cycle history began in 1970-71 when the Cavaliers filled the winter void. Of course, Cleveland didn't qualify as a cycle-eligible sports city from 1996-97 through 1998-99 when we were one Browns franchise short of the proverbial three-bean salad.

Take those three years away and the Cavs are about to wrap up Cleveland's 39th sports cycle.

(You could argue that the Barons' glory years in the American Hockey League from the 1940s through the 1960s should be included, but tacking on a "minor-league" team would open up Pandora's Box. By that rationale, the Lingerie Football League's Crush should be included in Cleveland's 2011-12 cycle. And as much as I love the idea, let's be honest...)

The best way to judge each cycle is by the average winning percentage of each team's final record - not by adding the wins and losses together and calculating that winning percentage.

This serves two purposes: one, it properly balances the lengths of the seasons of the respective teams; and two, it puts the appropriate amount of emphasis on the Browns' influence on our overall self-esteem despite playing an hysterically fewer number of games.

For example, in the 2008-09 cycle, if you add up the three teams' records, you get an impressive overall won/loss percentage of .581.

But to do so is to treat the Browns' 4-12 season as equal to a two-and-a-half week stretch of Indians baseball or less than a quarter of the Cavs' schedule. Clearly, 16 Indians or Cavs games are not the equivalent of 16 Browns games.

But if you take the 2008 Browns' crackerjack winning percentage of .250 and compare that to the 2008 Indians' even .500, you now have 16 Browns' games weighted equally with 162 Tribe games. Tack on the equally weighted 82 Cavs games from their historic, 66-win 2008-09 campaign and you'll get an average winning percentage of .518 - far more indicative of the type of cycle it was than the overall winning percentage would indicate.

Qualifying for the playoffs and then succeeding in the playoffs also can't factor in, other than anecdotally or perhaps as a tiebreaker. For one, it's far easier for the Cavs to reach the postseason than the Browns or Indians, and winning a first-round playoff series in the NBA isn't as meaningful as taking a first-round NFL playoff game - and both are less consequential than winning a postseason baseball series.

So rather than comparing apples to oranges, let's dump the whole fruit basket and just stick with the candy bars.

Naturally, the question arises: which are the best and which are the worst sports cycles Cleveland has experienced?

Granted, no Cleveland team has captured a world title since it became cycle-eligible, so it's tough to look at any cycle as truly golden. But some have clearly been better than others.

And in the nearly four decades of the concept, never have all three Cleveland teams reached the postseason in the same cycle. In fact, only twice have all three had winning records. Conversely, all three teams have had losing records in six of the 38 cycles (with 2011-12 about to be seven).

Here are the top five, with a * indicating that team reached the postseason.

5. 1995-96 (.527)

**Indians 100-44 (.694)*

Browns 5-11 (.313)

**Cavs 47-35 (.573)*

This may have been the most schizophrenic cycle Cleveland has seen. The Indians had one of their best seasons - winning 100 games and reaching the World Series - while the Browns had perhaps their worst - going 5-11 and ceasing to exist at season's end. Still, the Indians' historic campaign and a nice performance by the Cavs, who also reached the postseason, made 1995-96 a pretty good time overall.

4. 1986-87 (.549)

Indians 84-78 (.519)

**Browns 12-4 (.750)*

Cavs 31-51 (.378)

This cycle pretty much proves that as go the Browns, so goes Cleveland. The 1986 Browns posted their best record in decades, winning three out of every four games, which propelled the cycle's overall winning percentage well over the .500 mark despite the Indians' fun but still modest record and the rebuilding Cavs' 51-loss campaign.

3. 2007-08 (.589)

**Indians 96-66 (.593)*

Browns 10-6 (.625)

**Cavs 45-37 (.549)*

This is the cycle that is dearest to most fans - the closest we've ever come to seeing all three teams in the playoffs. The Indians won the division and came within a victory of the World Series, the Browns missed a wild card berth on the last day of the season, and the Cavs took the eventual-champion Celtics to the limit in the conference semifinals. It was the first time in over 10 years all three teams had winning records in the same cycle - and to date, the last time it's happened.

2. 1994-95 (.599)

Indians 66-47 (.584)

**Browns 11-5 (.688)*

**Cavs 43-39 (.524)*

Here again, Cleveland came within a whisker of a playoff triple crown, denied only by baseball's

players' strike with the Indians poised to reach the postseason for the first time in 40 years. Still, the Tribe's wonderful turnaround season, combined with a refreshing Browns playoff run and another yeoman effort by Mike Fratello's gritty Cavaliers made 1994-95 quite a ride.

1. 1988-89 (.601)

Indians 78-84 (.482)

**Browns 10-6 (.625)*

**Cavs 57-25 (.695)*

You wouldn't think that a cycle that saw the Browns lose their head coach and Michael Jordan's infamous shot would be remembered as the best we've ever had. But bizarrely, it was. The Cavs posted what at that point was their finest record in club history, and Marty Schottenheimer's final Browns team endured three dozen injuries to go 10-6 and reach the playoffs. Plus, though the Indians finished beneath .500 as per usual, they started the year 14-3 and blazed through the first month of the season.

While the top five is all fun and games, the real competition for historic significance is at the opposite end of the spectrum, where there have been a handful of truly woeful cycles (dare we call them "menstrual"?) that all deserve consideration as the worst. There were several great candidates, but here are the statistical "winners":

34. 1999-2000 (.371)

**Indians 97-65 (.599)*

Browns 2-14 (.125)

Cavs 32-50 (.390)

Yes, the Indians scored seven trillion runs and coasted to a laughable division title and a playoff berth, but the Cavs began their post-Fratello tailspin and the ridiculously hopeless expansion Browns left scars that still haven't healed.

35. 2000-01 (.370)

Indians 90-72 (.556)

Browns 3-13 (.188)

Cavs 30-52 (.366)

The Browns and Cavs were essentially the same miserable teams they were the cycle before, while the Indians dipped a bit, missing the playoffs for the first time in seven years. Put together,

1999-2000 and 2000-01 were the worst back-to-back cycles Cleveland has ever seen.

36. 1990-91 (.355)

Indians 77-85 (.475)

Browns 3-13 (.188)

Cavs 33-49 (.402)

After an impressive run by both the Browns and Cavs that saw each make the playoffs in multiple seasons, the momentum came to a screeching halt in this cycle when Mark Price blew out his knee, essentially ending the Cavs campaign in November, and time (and a myriad of horrible front-office decisions) finally caught up with the aging Browns. Luckily, the Indians were there with their typical 77-win season to keep things from getting out of hand.

37. 1981-82 (.334)

Indians 52-51 (.505)

Browns 5-11 (.313)

Cavs 15-67 (.183)

Here's another example of the mediocre Tribe looking like saviors. The post-Kardiac Kids Browns flopped and the second Cavs team under Ted Stepien's ownership became one of professional sports' greatest abominations. Somehow the Indians finishing one game above .500 seemed worthy of a tickertape parade.

38. 2010-11 (.324)

Indians 69-93 (.426)

Browns 5-11 (.313)

Cavs 19-63 (.232)

For the first time in seven years, all three Cleveland teams posted losing records in the same cycle, and while none of them were historically bad, they combined to put together the city's worst cycle ever.

Here's hoping 2012-13 proves to be the effective rinse cycle we so desperately need.

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