Gary Benz is out in Glendale, Arizona this week for the National Championship Game, and so are alot of other Cleveland Buckeye fans. Gary takes some time out from his sojourn out west, and comments on the pessimism of Clevelanders out there. If they're not convinced Tressel will leave the Buckeyes for the Browns job, they're complaining about how Boise State's big win over Oklahoma makes them feel uneasy about the Buckeyes chances against the Gators. Be assured, the Cleveland Paranoia is alive and well out in Arizona.

Editor's Note: Gary is in Phoenix this week for the Buckeyes-Gators National Championship Game.

It occurred to me somewhere over the Midwest as I wound my way to a stop over in Denver before heading to Phoenix that both the blessing and the curse of being a sports fan in Cleveland is that there rarely is a reason to ever get too overconfident. Cleveland fans have had so many sure things snatched from their grasp over the years, they're relatively convinced that nothing good will ever really happen.

The current paranoia over the possible defection of Ohio State head coach Jim Tressel to, of all teams, the Cleveland Browns, is but the latest and most fascinating example. Clevelanders are among the most rabid Ohio State fans nationwide, a passion that was surely re-stoked with the arrival of Tressel in Columbus. In fact, things are going so well with the Buckeyes these days, Clevelanders seem more miserable than ever. Listen to the sports talk programs—if you have the stomach. Read the local papers—if you're a glutton for punishment. It seems hardly a day goes by when some lazy and uninspired media slug is reporting a tip from some unnamed informed insider whose brother's uncle's next door neighbor is a friend of Tressel's dry cleaner who claims that he heard that the Browns are in secret negotiations with Tressel's agents about the Browns job.

But what's so ironic about this episode is that the rumor has him coming to Cleveland and that still makes the locals nuts The only possible outcome that most Clevelanders can foresee in that scenario is that the Buckeyes would sink into oblivion forever and ever while the Browns gain a new coach who couldn't possibly succeed in this environment.

While it's hard to believe that this story ever had any legs, it is a sort of bellwether for how

Clevelanders view the world. Which is why, if asked, most Clevelanders would admit that in their heart of hearts the Buckeyes are a lock to lose on Monday night. It's not that they don't want them to win or don't hope they'll win. It's just that, in the end, the typical Clevelander mentality is that we can't possibly win it all, the 2002 National Championship game notwithstanding. In fact, if anything the 2002 game serves as even more reason for feeding the beast, for we were lucky once. Surely the sports gods wouldn't let us be happy again. It's only been four years after all.

Which is why, of course, we're also starting to see so many stories suggesting either that the Buckeyes may be taking Florida too lightly, that the Florida Gators are much stronger than most of us believe and/or that karma is simply with the Gators. The better, you see, to assert our superiority by saying "we told you so" when the Buckeyes lose.

But to this point, what objective evidence is there for any of this?

It seems like the only reason so many think the Buckeyes may be taking the Gators too lightly is that Oklahoma lost to Boise State. Somehow this non sequiter makes perfect sense to a rather paranoid community. Ok, maybe Oklahoma did take Boise State a bit too lightly in a meaningless bowl game, but that's hardly a parallel to the National Championship game. More to the point, you'd be hard pressed to find any game against any opponent during the Tressel years where the Buckeyes came out flat, the clearest sign of not taking a team seriously. What Tressel seems to do best is convince his players that any team on any day can beat any other unless you're adequately prepared for it. If you need further proof, forget about the "coach speak" you naturally get from Tressel in discussing the Gators. Listen instead to the players. To a person they've spoken respectfully and, more importantly, knowledgeably about the Gators. They came name their players and they understand their strengths. They know who they've beaten and whose beaten them. Heck, they probably know their birthdays and their shoe sizes.

Listen, for example, to receiver Anthony Gonzalez. In discussing the Gators with the collected media yesterday "I feel like they say to themselves, 'OK, we feel like we have better athletes than you, and we're just going to prove it. We are just going to play man coverage, and we're just going to be better than you.' They have had tremendous success doing that against some pretty talented receiving corps." Does this sound like someone who doesn't understand what he's getting into on Monday?

When faced with this does of reality, Clevelanders don't take comfort and faith that the Buckeyes will be adequately prepared for all eventualities. They change focus. They point, for example, to the distractions that Buckeye quarterback Troy Smith probably has endured as a result of winning the Heisman trophy, which itself is a subset of the larger paranoia since it assumes that Smith couldn't possibly win the Heisman and remain focused on the task at hand. They point to the fact that Ohio State hasn't ever won a bowl game against a SEC opponent, as if what happened in the 1978 Sugar Bowl or the 2002 Outback Bowl, for that matter, makes a difference. And if that isn't proof enough that the Buckeyes will fail, then they start drawing the parallels between the Buckeyes 2002 team and this year's Gators team. The conspiracy theorists and naval gazers see the stars aligning for the Gators now much as they did for the

Buckeyes then. Urban Meyer is in his second year, just like Tressel. The Gators have struggled and barely prevailed in several games this year, just like the Buckeyes did in 2002. The Gators are a heavy underdog against a seemingly unstoppable opponent, just like the Buckeyes were. If you look hard enough, there are probably a dozen other eerie parallels as well.

None of this means a thing, of course. The truth and the victory lie in which team better handles the long layoff. What should be apparent to most fans that have bothered to watch the various BCS bowls is that literally every team has looked sluggish, particularly on offense, for parts of their games. And for the Buckeyes, the layoff has been a full two weeks longer than for the Gators. Finding that offensive groove that the Buckeyes had at the end of the season when they scored 40 or more points in four of their last five games may be difficult from the opening bell, but it's hard to believe that the malaise could linger too long. Tressel is simply too good of a coach and motivator to let that happen.

Still, it's doubtful that most Clevelanders will take comfort in any of this. It just doesn't fit with how they view life. Anticipating the worst is what they do best. And in that vein, it hardly matters what the outcome really is. If the Buckeyes lose, we'll that figures, doesn't it? And if they win? Well, that joy will last only about as long as it takes for most Clevelanders to figure out that it might not ever happen again.