

Cleveland's Bitter Pill

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**A Diagnosis of Injured Title
Dreams and Die-Hard Fans**

Joseph Congeni, MD
with Thomas Bacher



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Introduction

Cleveland fans love their sports teams. The relationship, however, has been a painful one. After all, the last time the city celebrated a championship was in 1964, when the Browns beat the Baltimore Colts. That victory capped a fantastic era from 1946 until the early 1960s that brought home eight championships in the All-American Football Conference and the National Football League. Through 1965, the Browns played in thirteen championship games, losing five times. In a twenty-year span, the Browns were championship game contenders 65 percent of the time.

The other major sport team during that era, the Cleveland Indians, had a great deal of success, too. The Indians won the World Series in 1948 and appeared in the World Series in 1954. The team finished second in the American League in 1951, 1952, 1953, 1955, 1956, and 1959.

After the 1964 championship, the loyalty of Cleveland fans has been tested beyond comprehension. Browns fans have had to endure “Red Right 88,” “The Drive,” “The Fumble,” and Modell’s “Move.” Indians fans have had to be strong enough to overcome the “The Curse of Rocky Colavito,” and World Series losses in 1995 and 1997, the latter being all the more painful because the team’s ace reliever couldn’t hold a one-run lead in the ninth inning of game seven. The Cavaliers, the newest of the city’s professional sports franchises, were at times almost comical when they started out in 1970. However, as the team progressed, Cavaliers fans have had to withstand disappointments of their own. In 1989, “The Shot” by Michael Jordan decimated the hearts of the Cleveland faithful and cost the Cavaliers a possible champion-

ship run. Although LeBron James has now returned to Cleveland, his “Decision” to take his talents to Miami left the city in mourning.

In the wake of all this despair, Cleveland sports fans have grown more passionate and rabid over the years. Local radio sports talk shows fill the airwaves and fans are not shy about expressing their opinions. When the new Cleveland Indians ballpark, Jacobs Field (now Progressive Field) opened, fans responded with 455 consecutive sellouts from 1995 to 2001. Despite the economic downturn and rooting for a team that hasn't won five games since 2007, Browns home games have not been blacked out. What drives the Cleveland fan to hope against all odds? Why does generation after generation still support the local clubs? What binds the area sports rooters into a “Fraternity of Misery”? Perhaps Cleveland fans come together to fight off the outsiders. Area supporters can criticize their own teams, but they won't tolerate any criticism from rival fans, including Steelers, Yankees, Celtics, or Heat followers. Maybe the hardworking ethic in and around Cleveland allows fans to take their yearly lumps because they know next year will be better, even if next year brings much of the same.

Sometimes, Cleveland fans feel cursed. No matter how far one of their teams might go, a dark cloud always seems to follow and a storm denies the fans their championship. Cleveland fans live week to week and even day to day. Earlier results mean nothing and rooters' impatience can lead to quick dismissals of coaches and general managers. Owners can't escape fans' wrath, either. Cleveland teams rarely land high-salaried free agents and lose their own free agents to higher-bidding organizations. Fans have to reacquaint themselves with new rosters continually. This lack of stability is best illustrated by the facts that since 1999 the Browns have had twenty starting quarterback, the Indians have had seven managers, and the Cavaliers have had seven head coaches. The Cleveland Camelot has turned into Cleveland Chaos.

National media outlets like to provide fodder for fans' ire. Cleveland is the “mistake on the lake” and that moniker plays out in dismal

professional sports teams. Except in a few rare instances, ineptitude leads to ineffectiveness and the cycle is continuous. However, national pundits don't quite understand the Cleveland fan. Cleveland rooters tend to see the bright side and relish in the small victories that galvanize Cleveland's fan base.

Cavs fans became Mavs supporters and soaked up Dallas's victory over the LeBron-led Miami Heat in the 2011 NBA Finals. In December 2009, on a bitterly cold Thursday evening, the Browns defeated Ben Roethlisberger and the Steelers, knocking them out of the playoffs. The victory ended a twelve-game losing streak against Pittsburgh and local fans celebrated the outcome as if it were a Super Bowl triumph. With a roster of very few stars, the Cleveland Indians managed to make baseball's one-game playoff in 2013. Even after "The Decision," fans recovered and began speculating about the next superstar the Cavaliers could draft.

The wariness of Cleveland fans runs deep. In June 1948, the year the Indians would go on to win the World Series, a story in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* by Sports Editor Gordon Cobbledick pointed out that Indians fans were "... afraid to believe this year may be different," because they had been disappointed so many times recently. In 1954, at a point in the season when the Indians had already won 109 games, some fans booed the team after the September loss to the Chicago White Sox. A local columnist wryly pointed out the team had, after all, lost 41 games. For area fans, any loss might be the first in a series leading to disaster.

Fans booed Brian Sipe in 1982, only two years after he was named the MVP of the NFL. In 1904, thousands of Cleveland fans contended that the baseball team (then named the Naps) didn't want to win a pennant because it would be disastrous for the club and its finances—a great rationale for failure (*Plain Dealer*, February 20, 1909). The year after Frank Ryan helped win the NFL Championship for the Cleveland Browns, fans jeered him and questioned his leadership skills. And to add insult to injury, the local media took time to point out that T-shirts of Super Joe Charboneau and the Kardiac

Kids could be found on the clearance tables of local department stores after the dreams of a possible championship turned into cellar dwelling.

However, even with disaster lurking in the corners of the area's professional sporting venues, fans don't really give up. Browns Backers Worldwide boasts over 340 chapters and over 90,000 members. It seems moving elsewhere can strengthen fans' commitments to their home teams. Cleveland is a sports town built on the enduring hope and indestructible dreams of its passionate fans. Wearing emotions on their collective sleeves, fans can take heartbreak as long as they experience thrills along the way. Every Clevelander knows the shining championship moment is still attainable.

In the 1950s, Cleveland ranked as the seventh largest city in the country. By 1970, it was tenth and in 2010, the city had dropped to sixteenth. Faced with putting together smaller-market teams, the Browns, Cavaliers, and Indians don't have the luxury of having deep rosters. From torn rotator cuffs to torn knee ligaments, from sprained ankles to sprained backs, and from broken legs to broken arms, Cleveland's bitter pill has taken some of its best athletes and immobilized them at inopportune times. Shaq gave fans his inside dominance and his ailing thumb in 2010. Herb Score was a blazing left-hander until he took a line drive to the face in 1957. When the Las Vegas oddsmakers picked the Browns to win the Super Bowl in 1988, Bernie Kosar's arm injury derailed championship aspirations. These are just a few of the stories that follow.

Cleveland Indians

1915–present American League
Last World Series Title—1920



(Top) Cleveland Naps, 1913 (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-bbc-2077f)

(Bottom) Portraits of the captains of the twelve baseball teams in the National League including Oliver W. “Patsy” Tebeau of the Cleveland Spiders, 1895. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-18403)

In 1871 and 1872, Cleveland fielded a team named the Forest Citys in the first professional baseball league in America. When the National League formed, Cleveland participated from 1879 through 1884 as the Cleveland Blues. The team moved to the American Association for the 1887 and 1888 seasons. The Cleveland Infants played for one year (1890) in the short-lived Players League. By 1889, Cleveland's National League team was known as the Spiders. Ignominiously, the 1899 Cleveland Spiders finished with the worst record ever in professional baseball. The team won 20 games and lost a stunning 134. The most wins any starting pitcher registered that year were four.

Even when Cleveland teams weren't part of one of the major leagues, local baseball was still popular. Fans must have truly gotten their money's worth during a May 17, 1870, contest between the Forest Citys and the Atlantics. By the end of the fifth inning, the Forest Citys were ahead 132-1, having belted out 180 hits, 101 of them singles.

On April 21, 1901, the Cleveland Blues, of the newly formed American Baseball League, hosted Chicago to inaugurate play in the circuit that would rival the decades-old National League. Cleveland lost 8-2. The team changed its name the following year to the Bronchos and again in 1903 to the Naps, for their star player Napoleon Lajoie. When Lajoie left after the 1914 season, local sportswriters temporarily chose the name Indians "as the club may so conduct itself during the present season as to earn some other cognomen which may be more appropriate" (*Plain Dealer*, January 17, 1915). In part, the name was a throwback to 1897. A Native American, Louis Sockalexis, was a fabulous rookie on the 1897 team and fans began referring to the team as the Indians. Unfortunately, midway through the season Sockalexis's career plummeted after the inebriated star jumped out of a second-story window and broke his ankle.

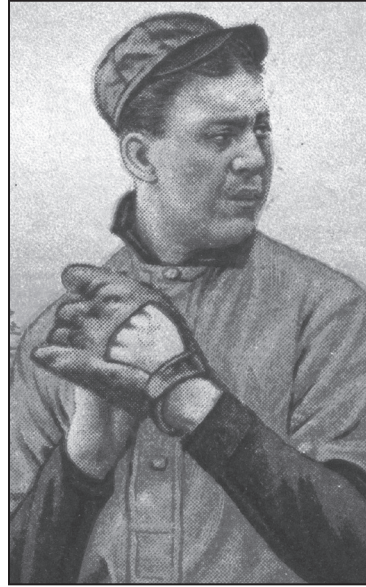
A Pitcher Felled by the White Plague

Adrian C. “Addie” “The Maestro of Twirlology” Joss

Born: 1880 Died: 1911
Cleveland Bluebirds and
Cleveland Naps: 1902–10

Position: Pitcher

Jersey Number: N/A (Numbers were not worn at this time. In 1916, the Cleveland Indians were the first team to employ numbers, which were affixed to the jersey’s left sleeve.)



Addie Joss, American Tobacco Company Trading Card, early 1900s (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-bbc-0923f)

SYMPTOMS

Addie Joss was born in 1880 in Woodland, Wisconsin, and went on to play baseball with several semiprofessional clubs. In the spring of 1898, Charles Strobel, owner of Strobel Aviation and the Toledo club of the Interstate League, signed the pitcher. Joss developed his skills with Toledo before moving to Cleveland in 1902.

In 1907, Joss posted a league-leading 27–11 record. Nonetheless, the Naps finished at 77–75 and in fifth place. The following year, Joss led the league with a stellar 1.16 ERA and pitched a perfect game, throwing only seventy-four pitches during the contest. By September 22, the Naps had overtaken Detroit for the top spot in the American League, and the race was destined to go down to the wire. In the end, Cleveland and Detroit tied with 90 victories, but Detroit only lost 63

games to Cleveland's 64 (rainouts were not always replayed). Detroit went on to the World Series and lost to the Chicago Cubs.

Joss seemed set to lead the team again in 1909, but his record fell to 14–13 and his strikeout numbers for nine innings also declined. The following season, Joss developed what the *Plain Dealer* described as “a ligament torn loose over the elbow of his pitching arm” (June 15, 1910). He tried to pitch but was ineffective, finishing with a 5–5 record, and after August didn't pitch for the rest of the season.

Joss returned to spring training in 1911 and pronounced himself fit enough to be part of the starting rotation. But in early April, after he suddenly fainted at the Naps' Chattanooga training camp, the team sent him back home to Toledo. The Cleveland team physician Dr. M. H. Castle visited him on April 13 and called the Tribe hurler a very sick man. Joss had initially suffered a bout of pleurisy, but was now showing signs of possible brain hemorrhaging. The next day Joss passed away from tuberculous meningitis at the age of thirty-one. The team refused to play a scheduled game with the Tigers in Detroit and made the trip to Toledo for the funeral.

Among the telegrams that Joss's widow received was one from Mr. and Mrs. Ty Cobb. “Please accept our deepest sympathies in your present bereavement. The shock was terrible to us. He numbered his friends by his acquaintances. We cannot find words to express feelings as we should” (*Plain Dealer*, April 6, 1911).

In 1978, Joss was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame by the veteran's committee.

PATIENT HISTORY

“Joss sort of hid the ball on you. One moment, you'd be squinting at a long graceful windup and the next instant, out of nowhere, the ball was hopping across the plate—and a lot of us standing flat-footed with our bats glued to our shoulders!”

—Bobby Wallace, Baseball Hall of Famer

“There is not a star pitcher in this country today but had to take some terrific beatings before he acquired the wisdom that made him a star.”

—Addie Joss

“I agree with Addie Joss when he said that pitching was the biggest part of the game. If I had had Veau Gregg to work along with Addie back in 1908 we would have played the Cubs for the world’s pennant, but one star pitcher rarely wins a pennant, especially if that star is a man who needs at least three days in between his games.”

—Nap Lajoie, Cleveland manager and Baseball Hall of Famer

DIAGNOSIS

Addie Joss’s tragic death came over a decade before Ray Chapman’s death as the result of getting hit by a pitch. While Chapman always seemed to represent Tribe injury misfortune, Joss could easily have been the first sign of bad luck—a very rare and rapidly spreading form of meningitis struck the pitcher down in his prime. Joss was the dominant pitcher of the early 1900s; without Joss, the Naps drifted out of contention.

SECOND OPINION

The Naps might have overcome the loss of Joss if Veau Gregg had stayed healthy. Gregg was a six-foot-two and 180-pound southpaw who had a devastating curve ball. As a twenty-six-year-old rookie for the 1911 Cleveland Naps, Gregg won 23 games and led the American League with a 1.80 ERA. Both Ty Cobb and Eddie Collins called him the best left-hander in the league. In his first three major league campaigns, Gregg won at least 20 games, the only twentieth-century pitcher to do so. Unfortunately, Gregg developed arm trouble and was eventually traded to Boston. Gregg is attributed with coining