

## God Loves Cleveland

*The Cleveland Cavaliers winning the NBA Championship is a reminder that sports are not the way we make our living. They are the way lives are made in some families and entire communities.*

By Jared Frank, ALSD

This is a story of three little boys from Northeast Ohio.

Little boys and girls for generations have grown up on America's North Coast hearing tales about the good ol' days. There is a problem with referring to the past as the good ol' days. Some little boys and girls will infer, consciously or subconsciously, that the present must be something less than good times.

I was once one of those little boys.

The stories spun out of Cleveland, Ohio for the past 52 years, those mythologies passed down from father to daughter, from mother to son, are ones full of excitement, crescendos to near victory only to crash abruptly into denouements of defeat.

Clevelanders have been one step away from the mountaintop over and over again. But the higher we climbed, the harder we fell. And we were always seemingly brave enough or dumb enough to want to start climbing again only to hear the same commandant each time before the summit – Thou Shall Not Win Championships.

You've probably heard stories about Cleveland too. And you know what? They're pretty much all true. The Cuyahoga River did catch on fire in 1969, having been so obnoxiously polluted. The city did default on its debt in 1978. Newspaper headlines for decades did read some iteration of "God Hates Cleveland."

I grew up believing these headlines. They were all I knew. You probably can say the same, as the national narrative preached this gospel from sea to shining sea.

### THE GOOD OL' DAYS

But it wasn't always so. The completion of the Erie Canal in the 19th century established Cleveland as a vital commercial port for the transportation of goods between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean. Native son John D. Rockefeller started Standard Ohio in Cleveland in 1870. By 1920, Cleveland was America's fifth-largest city, soon to have the third-largest number of Fortune 500 companies, a rising power of manufacturing, a broad-shouldered steel boomer, a beating

heart of American industrial brawn.

Those were the good ol' days.

The good times continued into 1949, when the city received an All-America City Award. But 1949 was also the year that Cleveland's population peaked. Today, it's behind places like Omaha, Nebraska and Wichita, Kansas in the census count with only 388,000 residents living within the city limits (the metro area has just over two million residents).

In the 1940s and 1950s, Cleveland was dubbed the "Best Location in the Nation." By the 1960s and 1970s, it became the "Mistake on the Lake", and residents started noticing the city's 200-plus cloudy days each year much more frequently.

### BORN INTO THIS

This past being prologue, I was born into the thick clouds in 1982, destined to live in the inferiority complex and denial pervasive in Northeast Ohio by that time.

Like most kids in Northeast Ohio, the vines of my attitude were trained by sports. I watched the Browns win on a lot of autumn Sundays, then always lose their final game in the early winds of winter, then move to Baltimore and win a Super Bowl after only four years. I went to bed every summer night listening to the unmistakable tenor of Tom Hamilton and the beautifully rough cadence of Herb Score on my Sony clock-radio, but the Indians lost many more games than they won, as expected. Fortunately, I would fall asleep before most of the blowouts and blown saves.

Before two World Series appearances (and heartbreaking losses) in the 1990s, the highlight for most Tribe fans every year was watching *Major League*, a movie in which the Indians don't even win the World Series (or even the ALCS). We couldn't even win in fantasy land, let alone Believeland, and certainly not in Cleveland.

My hometown is about 50 miles south



My nephews, Connor (left, age eight) and Caleb (right, age ten), attended the Cavs championship parade with their parents and another 1.3 million Northeast Ohioans earlier this summer in Cleveland.

## STAFF EDITORIAL

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of downtown Cleveland. Massillon, Ohio is a place with fingernails blackened by dirt, cracked and bleeding pride. It's a place lived cradle to grave, full of grassy fields of ghosts and gods. I chose a different life than the one it has to offer, but make no mistake, that rusted town is my favorite place on planet Earth. Love does not begin to describe my affection for the place that made me, that I carry with me to new places.

Paul Brown, the NFL Hall of Famer, former head coach, and namesake of the Cleveland Browns, was born, raised, and is buried in Massillon. He completes the Trinity, our holy spirit. I was born into a divine right to play sports.

Around my childhood home, the bushes and couch cushions were my opponents. I was always playing a football game from the time I could walk, against imaginary defenders if necessary. But all too often, I learned to anticipate the sound of a silent defeat as much or more as a victory bell. And all too often, I followed the lead of the townspeople, always looking back in time and never ahead.



Ryan Mirabedini, Premium Account Manager for the Cavs and a Wadsworth, Ohio native, enjoys his moment with the Larry O'Brien Trophy. "My entire life I wondered how I would react if we won a title. When we actually won it, I found myself screaming. Not even coherently. Just screaming."



My nephew Connor has also celebrated the championship with lots of screaming.

### THE KING JAMES BIBLE

If Paul Brown is a holy spirit, then LeBron James is a messiah. The Book of LeBron is a complicated one. To understand it chapter and verse, you have to have witnessed its beginnings.

When LeBron was in high school, I was in high school. When his team played in our gym, it was packed. He kicked our ass, and no one cared. It was obvious to anyone with eyeballs that he was no normal 16-year-old, a

boy already in a man's body. And this ultimate warrior came from our troubled tribe. Which is why it was gutting for many when he left the tribe the way that he did.

Even if beyond normal, LeBron proved to be just another flawed human being. Which in a way, tied him to Northeast Ohio closer than ever.

Personally, I was never upset with LeBron for leaving Cleveland for someplace brighter. I did the same thing, as did many of my

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friends. So did Rockefeller, George Steinbrenner, James Garfield, and a host of others. And if it's ok for an oil tycoon, shipping magnate, and President of the United States to follow opportunity away from Northeast Ohio, I'm certain it's ok for a basketball player to do the same. That said, I was happy as hell when LeBron announced his homecoming.

Cleveland's well-documented sports miseries reflected as well as led the commercial and emotional decline of the city. My dad worked for The Timken Company, a manufacturer of steel bearings headquartered in Canton, Ohio, for a long 40 years. He was also in the 8th grade the last time a Cleveland team won a championship, the Browns in 1964. I truly believe there is a correlation between those two facts, and no one can convince me otherwise. But now because of LeBron James, whenever his day comes, he will die in peace.

### A FAMILY AFFAIR

The Cleveland Cavaliers winning the 2016 NBA Championship is a big deal. And not so my dad can cease being a grumpy old man. It's not just a feel-good story. It's not just fluff to fill editorial space. It matters. And I'll tell you why – the two other little boys made mention of in this story's beginning.

My nephews, ages ten and eight, won't grow up with Cleveland guilt. They won't fall in love with the expectation of heartbreak. If their lives must too be defined by sports, at least they'll grow up expecting good things to happen to them, win or lose.

For Ryan Mirabedini, Premium Account Manager for the Cavs and a Wadsworth, Ohio native, Cleveland sports is also a family thing, even for his family members who now live in Colorado.

"They're obsessed with [Cleveland sports]," Mirabedini says. "I even bought my sister the NBA TV package so she could watch all of the Cavs games."

He also remembers the day LeBron came home, when his grandma kept calling him.

"I was thinking I'd obviously love to talk to my grandma, but it wasn't the best time,"

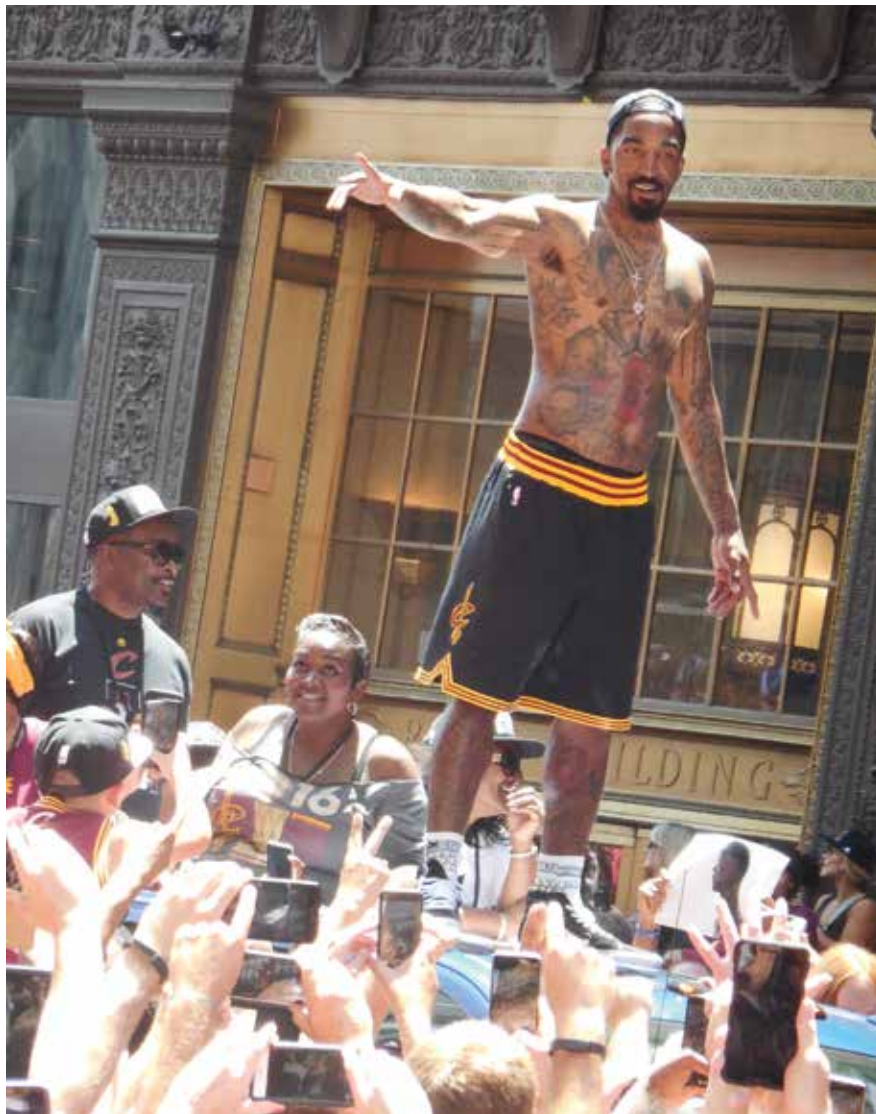


Photo Credit: Caleb Stives

Cavs Shooting Guard J.R. Smith, infamous for a few episodes earlier in his career, is now famous for his shirtless celebrating. Who knows when he'll actually put one back on.

he recalls. "Then my uncle texted me and told me she was calling because she wanted to buy Cavs' seats. So through and through, it's a family affair."

For Cavaliers business partners, this year's championship means just as much joy. After all, most of them are Clevelanders too, and many of them have given the organization their business since the olden days of the Richfield Coliseum.

"It's very fulfilling to know that the people who stuck with us through the good times

and the bad times, the true Clevelanders, are being rewarded," says Mirabedini.

### A NEW IDENTITY

Cleveland is many things to many people. But for all who claim it, Cleveland is home, forever a state of mind. I have moved away from Cleveland and grown roots elsewhere, and I can't envision a scenario of moving back, but the sawdust in my bones and the steel of my soul will forever be Ohio-made.

And now the city that so many of us

**Grown men cried. Lots of grown men, including yours truly.  
And I wasn't even there.**



Photo Credit: Caleb Stives

Cavs Guard Iman Shumpert (also shirtless by this point) basks in the championship afterglow with 1.3 million Clevelanders. Mirabedini says, “[The parade] got to me, seeing everybody come together in peace, watching the pure joy and how it affected people’s lives.”

identify with, in and out of it, is no longer an identity in crisis, no longer identifying itself as a loser, no longer Charlie Brown in a Browns jersey, no longer the only major professional sports city with three franchises that since 1964 has not delivered a championship.

Fifty-two years of pent up demand for championship merchandise has resulted in quite a windfall for some retailers. In August, Dick’s Sporting Goods reported better-than-expected second-quarter earnings, highlighted by online sales growth of 26%. And although executives didn’t specifically say so, I have a sneaking suspicion that Cavs fans worldwide contributed to this record growth.

I can say for certain that my household in Dallas, Texas purchased five shirts from DicksSportingGoods.com, and Cavs fans collectively broke all kinds of championship merchandise records. Hopefully J.R. Smith was able to pick up at least one shirt, as he seemed to lose all of his during the course of celebration.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Unofficially, 1.3 million people (nearly two-thirds of the metro area) celebrated with J.R. Smith and company at the Cavs championship parade.

“On a macro level, [the parade] shows how fortunate we are to work in this industry, and why it is special,” says Mirabedini. “It got to me, seeing everybody come together in peace, watching the pure joy and how it affected people’s lives. It didn’t matter whether you were black, white, Asian, Hispanic, purple, or brown. Everybody was there mixed together as one.”

Grown men cried. Lots of grown men, including yours truly. And I wasn’t even there, instead only watching it on TV.

My nephews didn’t cry, but their parents did take them to the parade to bear witness to how good life can feel. They are two rambunctious little guys, growing up in a different Northeast Ohio than I did with an economy remaking itself with healthcare, technology,

and finance, a burgeoning culinary scene with Iron Chefs and James Beard Award winners, a renowned city for the arts, and now most importantly without a close second, a sports champion once again.

For my nephews Caleb and Connor Stives, “The Shot” is not MJ’s. It is Kyrie’s. And “The Fumble” is now “The Block.” My history of Cleveland is old testament. Their history of Cleveland is a new and optimistic narrative, different from mine, but with a common ethos. Three little boys from Northeast Ohio, their lives molded by sports.

What does the Cavaliers winning the NBA Championship mean for Cleveland? It’s just a sport. It means nothing. Only that it means everything for two little boys growing up on the west side who now get to spend their formative years in the good ol’ days, their futures forecasted with more than a hope and a prayer, not having to keep waiting for next year. Today is a good day for them. Win or lose, tomorrow will be better. #