

## POLAR OPPOSITES

Growing up in Cleveland made it hard to believe in God. Any god, except for Boreas who ruled cold north wind. Cleveland was a soulless tundra that made a Soviet gulag in Siberia seem like a vacation getaway, especially during childhood years when all you pined for was a sliver of sunshine, a moment of warmth. Most people in America use the weather for cocktail chatter. But just 250 miles north of here, winter up there is akin to having your mother-in-law move in for the darkest half the year, every year, from now until apocryphally, hell freezes over. For both elder-in-laws and winter, this must be why Florida exists.

Hence Cleveland was the perfect place to grow up, providing young ne'er-do-wells like us the space to rummage around without fear, guilt, or risk of falling down and hurting ourselves (here's the crucial clue: snow cushions). Before social media, helicopter parents, and cell phone monitoring, no one else was worried enough or warm enough to go outside to keep tabs on the teenagers. The parental theory was that we'd come inside when we got cold, then we'd be interrogated. But the crucial question they overlooked was: why would we come in? There were two cases of POC (Pride of Cleveland, \$5 per case) packed into the snow drift that ringed a December bonfire. With Mother Nature's facilities located just a couple steps behind the circle of illumination, we were safe in the knowledge that come morning, newly fallen snow would cover the empties as well as everyone's attempt to write their name in urine on that beautiful white background. The over-achievers would also attempt to script "Ohio" like the OSU band at halftime. Young male Clevelanders are essentially liver from the neck to the knees. That is why, sooner or later, we all had to leave that blessed town or else some night we'd lay down to make snow angels (our euphemistic approach to stop the spins) and no one would find our bodies until the May melt.

Sure, Cleveland was bleak, overcast and/or slushy for half the year. At least it wasn't Akron. Or Lorain. Or the worst place on Earth: Pittsburgh. Go Browns. Granted, Cleveland from November to March was an Ice Age version of Bill Murray's "Groundhog Day," except it wasn't pretty. But pretty didn't matter to us...we were from Cleveland.

To throw a bone to Clevelanders who might have fancied themselves as cultured – which to an oyster is just a mucus-like response to dirt in the system – i.e., someone who appreciated the finer things in life, they obviously lived in Shaker Heights. Much like in Cincinnati, a perceived gulch runs north-south and divides both cities into an enviable East Side and not-so-much West Side. If it wasn't clear from the above, yes, our band of innocent malcontents who had forged draft cards for fake IDs were proud West Siders. Of course, that's like belonging to the Harlan County Buddhist Society or the Flint MI Clean Water Crew, i.e., unaware of our inbred myopia. But the East-West divide there, as well as here, is deeply etched, and, of course, fictitious. There are similarities between Cleveland and Cincinnati, but not the uniformity wrongly assumed by outsiders (that is, anyone who considers the Buckeye State as flyover zone). After spending my first twenty years in Cleveland, and the most recent twenty in Cincinnati, this bookend approach to life has provided insight into the tale of these two cities. For just as a prism reveals the color spectrum, it's the combining of different hues and their wavelengths that makes light visible, revealing in the same way how I see both the contrasts and quirky similarities of Believe-Land and the Queen City.

Aside from the alphabetical coincidence, one shared touchstone is that both Cleveland and Cincinnati, at different times, attained the distinction of being America's sixth largest city. Cincinnati claimed it first back in the early 1800s when the city had a population of about 45,000 residents. Roughly a century later, Cleveland topped out at #6 in 1937 with over 900,000 folks. As we know, the Queen City flourished early when river trade led the country's expansion whereas Cleveland's growth was fueled by the Industrial Revolution, shipping along the Great Lakes and other sorts of smokestack economics.

Both cities were water-born (no "e"), but the sources of said water couldn't be more different. Cleveland rests on a stretch of rocky beach just across Lake Erie from Canada, while Cincinnati, here in the SW corner of the state, slips along the muddy banks of the Ohio River. Two centuries ago, the Ohio and Erie canal connected the two; much later I-71 fulfilled the same purpose. Nonetheless, Cleveland and Cincinnati were linked almost from the start, and as the two largest cities, they dominated state politics right up until Columbus stole the capital moniker from Chillicothe (an egregious bit of geographic gerrymandering on the grounds [literally] that it was smack in the middle of Ohio, that is, all roads roam there). Ever since, Columbians' insidious sense of Midwest manifest destiny revealed them annexing land willy-nilly to the point that parts of Columbus now extend over the Franklin County line, which completely goes against the Matreshka doll POV that cities fit inside counties which fit inside states which fit inside of countries which fit inside of continents. As a quick aside, if you wonder where all that unchecked city planning ends, it's in Houston, which we learned post-Hurricane Harvey, encompasses six counties and has a total landmass as large as Massachusetts. But let's not get started on Texas.

Cleveland and Cincinnati, like Sandburg's Chicago, were cities of big shoulders, specifically the shoulders of immigrants, the same new "citizens" who built most of the burgeoning cities in America. What with disease, natural selection, and understandably aggrieved natives, the first few generations of settlers couldn't reproduce quickly or reliably enough to grow into metropolises. Hence we harken back to the halcyon days of "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." America, well at least the America we grew up in, was called the melting pot due to our welcome wagon approach. Cincinnati claims two primary ethnic backgrounds: German and Irish. Cleveland had those too...plus all the rest. If there was indeed a pot on a stove here in Cincinnati, it was either Irish Stew or bratwurst and sauerkraut. In Cleveland, *everything* went into the pot and came out as goulash. Growing up, the smells that emanated from tiny, linoleum-floored kitchens tweaked our young noses and made us sprint out the door. No relief. Cleveland back then was a very stinky city. The steel mills smelled of sulfur. The Indians and the Cavaliers smelled worse, battling it out for the basement of their respective sports. The Cuyahoga River caught on fire, Lake Erie was pronounced dead, and the mayor set his hair on fire. You ever smelled burnt hair? Nasty odor, that.

Since Cleveland had an open-window policy for all countries to air out their political dissidents to the North Shore, those ethnic pockets and neighborhoods re-formed in Cleveland around churches and social clubs, both of which doubled as cultural and sporting centers where the conversation lapsed from foreign accents to Old Country tongues. For the Italian social clubs on Murray Hill, a.k.a hangouts for local mobsters, when they weren't shooting at each other, they played bocce out back. The Germanic clubs furthered the Fatherland's ideals of the gymnasium where minds and bodies grew strong.

Sports are big mirrors, but which sports were hew close to the heart in each city provides illumination into the character, and characters, therein. Cincinnati, perhaps by virtue of the Reds being MLB's oldest franchise set to celebrate their 150-year anniversary in 2019, also bonded early with the two other All-American sports of basketball and football. In Cleveland, soccer was a premier sport long before the rest of the country paid attention to the spotted round ball. Wrestling, too, as a previous paper noted.

This is not to suggest youth soccer in Cleveland was as fresh, or clean, or poised as it is here in Cincinnati forty years later. Soccer there and then was handed-down from generations of Eastern European cheat-skates [sic] and was just as fixed and/or faulty as when it was played six time zones away and fifty years prior. Case in point: I wore the Deutsche Zentrale uniform for a decade. The zenith of German Central, as it translated to, was when we were in the 14 and under league. For on that team of supposedly 14 years old and younger players, we had five kids who could drive...which strongly suggests they were 16 at least in the eyes of the state of Ohio. And one, Wolfie, who could legally buy beer at 18. Heck, Wolfie had a moustache and full beard. It should have been a scandal...except that every other team -- the Inter-Italians, the Ukrainians, the Hungies, the Croats, the Serbs, the Poles, and the other German team called Concordia -- they all had a similar complement of older players; we were all twin sons of a different motherland.

Early on, I couldn't figure out why my coach would always pick me up on registration day. I surmise that it was my US birth certificate, so not only was I the right age, but that piece of paper cast an aura of legitimacy over our whole roster. In the end, though, at 14, 15, 16 or whatever, we were playing the same exact teams that we had played against from the start. Everybody cast a blind eye, but heaven forbid an outside official come into the fold and ask to see the plastic driver's licenses in the wallets of half the kids on the team.

Cleveland's youth soccer teams each had their own style. From the beginning, our German coach pounded into our tiny heads that if the other team didn't score, we couldn't and wouldn't lose. So we'd crowd ten players in the penalty area and block any shot as it came off the opponent's foot. It doesn't make for an exciting game to watch until the last six minutes when our fastest players would be unleashed for wind-sprint breakaways down the field and the score would go from 0-0 to 1-0 or 2-0, before the final whistle blew. Other styles we learned about: the Serbs were highly skilled at stepping on heels, not a foul per se, but when you're kneeling down frantically trying to get your shoe back on and look up to see another teammate doing the same, you suddenly realize it wasn't a coincidence. The Ukes were famous for clutching a fistful of your jersey while sprinting alongside, essentially matching you step for step...because you couldn't get away and the referees couldn't see the hold as it was hidden by the side-by-side jostling for the ball.

Finally, the Cleveland soccer fields were maintained to support the home team's particular style. For instance, because of our reliance on defense, the grass at Deutsche Zentrale was a good four inches higher to slow down the ball. The Inter-Italians, playing at Gordon Park, a former landfill, knew where bits of recycled car tires poked up through the dirt. As these nubs of rubber were hidden by the grass, they'd use them to essentially tee up free kicks, sometimes even going backwards five yards from the spot of the foul to gain twenty yards when the ball would finally come down. They also knew where the broken

glass was, so they'd always run their offense into those areas because they knew we were afraid to slide tackle there. The Hungarians' field had a serious downhill slant, so whenever they won the coin toss, they'd give away the kickoff to ensure they defended the uphill section in the second half. The Serbs home field had a pond behind one goal, so when they needed a breather, the ball inevitably went into the water; even if it meant a corner kick by the other team, it was worth the extra minutes it would take to retrieve the game ball.

Best of all, we learned to swear in a dozen languages. This United Nations approach to the game especially came in handy when I moved to New York City and would join in the pick-up games in Central Park. All I had to do was drop a select word or phrase and, voila, I was accepted as one of their own. Last, and no surprise, we learned to play in any weather, and I can assure you that a waterlogged, frozen ball seemingly weighs about five pounds more and hurts like nobody's business when it slaps exposed skin. Therefore, passes to teammates lightly skimmed the ground, while shots intended to keep the other team from attacking quite so intently were intentionally head-high.

Both Cleveland and Cincinnati support strong business centers; these HQs also reveal differences and similarities, perhaps most in the ways that allied businesses sprung up around the anchoring early industries. As we know, it was re-manufacturing the by-products from Porkopolis that led to the world-famous soap and tallow factory. Still and all, future employment at P&G attracted many born-and-bred Cincinnatians to stay close to home. Whereas in Cleveland, soap, who needs soap? We revelled in the black dust of steel mills, dark caves that belched fire and magna, which transformed into the basic materials shipped to local auto plants and foundries. Cleveland's surprising ancillary industry is the Morton Salt Mine, which stretches for three miles under Lake Erie. Looking much like a below-ground white winter landscape, tons and tons of the rock salt comes up every year to melt the near-nightly snowfall. Because it was essentially a local vendor relationship, little to no restraint was put on how much salt was procured and spread. Over the course of a single winter, all this salt formed a sodium chloride crust, which slowly but surely ate through the chrome bumpers, door panels, and chassis of all the Vegas and Pintos clattering down the pot-holed roads to the jobs at the steel mills and auto plants. This is Cleveland's version of one hand washing the other, and how the Rust Belt got its name.

It's one thing to consider a career at P&G, with the sugarplum visions of stock options and postings abroad to faraway facilities in foreign countries. In Cleveland, the foreign country was your family photo album, and when you looked down the barrel of a career at the steel mill, all the outcomes were as alliterative as our hometown: Cancer. Coronary. Car wreck. Cirrhosis. So you begin to build your escape plan. Sure, the folly of youth made us all think we were smarter than the rest. But my plan was different, near unheard of, and as it unfolded, it engendered a final bit of foreshadowing and coincidence between Cleveland and Cincinnati unfolded.

Every year at the Cleveland Sportsmen Show, a desultory gathering of camo-clad hunters and other social misfits that was held at the downtown Cleveland Convention Center (a gussied-up name for a giant basement that smelled faintly of sewer), you could sign up to wrestle Victor, a 500-pound brown bear. Volunteers, or call them victims if you choose, could win \$100 if you could get Victor off his feet. I seriously believed I had a chance, in fact, I already knew how I was going to spend the \$100. I practiced on Bandit,

our St. Bernard-German shepherd mix, all 150 pounds of him, which was also what I weighed back then. We'd roll around in the snow, which delighted him to no end. I figured all animal instincts were the same. I had a plan.

After signing the waiver, we victims/volunteers were informed of a couple rules. No shoes, which makes slipping on the canvas mat inevitable. And we could not go to the side or behind Victor, which had been my plan: i.e., get underneath him, spin to the side, and tip. And while all animal instincts might be the same, a trained animal is very different. Victor was coached to go straight forward, bulldozing whoever might be in his way. At one time, I had three of Victor's massive paws wrapped up in my arms. But I was in no way prepared for lifting, or even moving, 500 pounds of beast. It felt a lot like pushing against a concrete wall, and I had as much success moving Victor as I would have moving said wall.

My sisters took a photo of that moment in the match, from high up in the stands. From that vantage point, it looks like Victor had eaten me, with only my then-skinny legs still sticking out of his muzzled mouth. He was also declawed. No pun intended, Victor was a bear to wrestle; three long minutes later, my \$100 was gone when the match was declared a draw. Stupid is as stupid does, you might say. Whereas I'd counter, a draw was a fair sight better than the other two competitors fared that night, both of whom Victor did bowl over, then sat on while guzzling a 2-liter bottle of Coca-Cola which his trainer gave him as a reward. Most inglorious of all, Victor then licked his vanquished foes, his big sticky tongue slopping their frightened faces. Plus, he also spilled a lot of that sticky Coke on them as well – bears aren't dainty drinkers.

So before you put in a motion to have my Literary Club membership reconsidered and/or revoked on grounds of obvious Cleveland-itis, let me add this for the record, which also brings together my last Cincinnati-Cleveland correlation. Remember, I was just a nobody high school kid looking for a way out of town. But two years afterward, a certain Mr. Jerry Springer, a.k.a Cincinnati's mayor/chief executive, someone some of you in this room might have actually voted for, wrestled the one and only Victor the Bear at the Cincinnati Convention Center. I guess he, too, was looking for his way out of town.