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ME **NFL** PREVIEW

GONE
TO THE

DAWGS

Browns Backers are the toughest fans in football – still **BY MIRIAM CAREY**

IN CLEVELAND, DISAPPOINTMENT IS YOUR CLOSE FRIEND.

Disappointment sits next to you at the bar chatting about the old days and bemoaning the coming season. Rarely – if ever – does Disappointment offer to buy you a round. Live here for a while, and you'll become so accustomed to teams losing by a field goal, a base hit or a three-point basket, that the pink slip on your desk won't sting so bad. And besides, Disappointment's always there to talk things over with you.

Under such conditions, it's almost curious that Cleveland Browns fans have earned the unofficial title of "most rabid fans in the nation." Pansy-ass academics develop theories about fans' devotion to the game. And while the most zealous team supporters do tend to come from the most downtrodden cities, the phenomenon can't be explained by a few fancy college

terms like "socio-economic conditions" or "the spirit of everyman." In the final analysis, the Cleveland Browns' Bone Lady says it best: "A lot has happened in football in the last 20 years. Players don't spend a career with one team anymore. They change teams, teams move ... But the fans are always there."

FANS, FOLLY AND DEVOTION

As a member of the Visa Hall of Fans at the Pro Football Hall of Fame and Museum in Canton, Ohio, the Bone Lady is part of a select community of team enthusiasts honored for their devotion to the game. She represents the feminine side of the Cleveland Browns' storied Dawg Pound. Big Dawg, another veteran from the Browns bleachers, is the granddaddy of all decorated football fans. They share their spot of honor at the

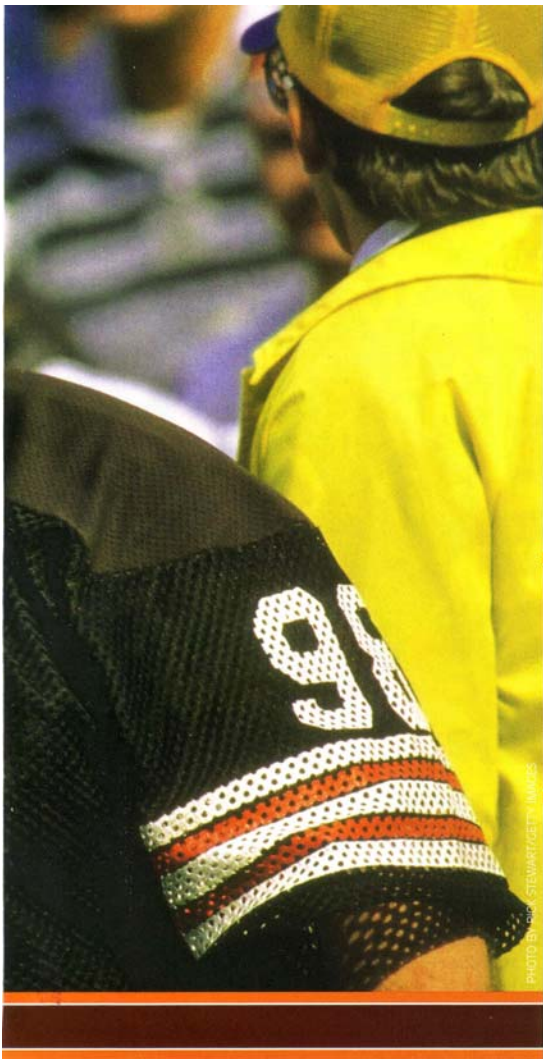


PHOTO BY JEFF STEWART/GETTY IMAGES

Hall of Fans with icons such as the Broncos' Barrel Man, the Redskins' Hogettes and "Da Pope" of the New Orleans Saints. While these characters might present cartoon-like personas during games, their dedication – and power – cannot be underestimated.

Take, for instance, the devotion of Baltimore fans. When the Colts snuck out of town under the cover of darkness in 1984, fans wept – but the team's marching band refused to yield. They practiced regularly, performing at football stadiums throughout the country and leading the charge at home to build a new stadium for a new team.

When a team finally did arrive in town in 1996 – after sneaking out of Cleveland under the cover of darkness – Browns fans raised such a hue and cry that an unprecedented arrangement had to be negotiated between the city and the National Football

League. Led by the city's mayor, and celebrities like Drew Carey, fans collected a million signatures and rallied until a deal was signed, allowing the city to keep the Browns name, team colors and heritage. Quite simply, the town and its football fans would not move forward until they had satisfaction.

TILL DEATH DO US PART

You just don't mess with football fans – particularly in Cleveland. Fans are connected to the Browns in an almost existential way, and the town maintains a frenzied pride for its no-frills hard-working team.

"The Browns were the team that didn't have cheerleaders or mascots or fancy logos on their helmets," says Scott Huler, author of *On Being Brown* (Gray & Company Publishers, 1999). "They were just bad-asses who went out on the field and played."

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Owner/coach Paul Brown led the team to victory in the 1940s and 1950s. In the late '50s, he brought in Jim Brown, arguably the game's best player ever. But since the golden years, Clevelanders have endured great seasons filled with near-miss wins and Hail Mary passes that delivered last-minute losses so devastating, human resource managers won't even entertain fantasies about work productivity going up until Tuesday afternoon. It's this sense of drama and connection to the team that turns a guy attending a football game into a devoted fan.

"There is something special between the team and the town," says Huler. "What [makes] the Browns a great franchise [is] their fans."

"RED RIGHT 88"

Phrases like "The Drive" and "The Fumble" hold deep meaning to Browns fans. The team's most famous tearjerker was the interception thrown by Brian Sipe in 1980 that stole yet another chance at the Super Bowl from the Browns in the last seconds of the game. Look a Clevelander in the eye and utter the phrase "red right 88," and you'll bring him to tears. "Red right 88" isn't just an expression," says James Powell, a Cleveland ex-pat living in Los Angeles. "The phrase conjures up that whole nightmare of dressing yourself up as a dog, freezing your ass off in ungodly temperatures for hours, just to see the team lose another heartbreaking, crucial game. And then you have to crawl home and go to work the next day." >

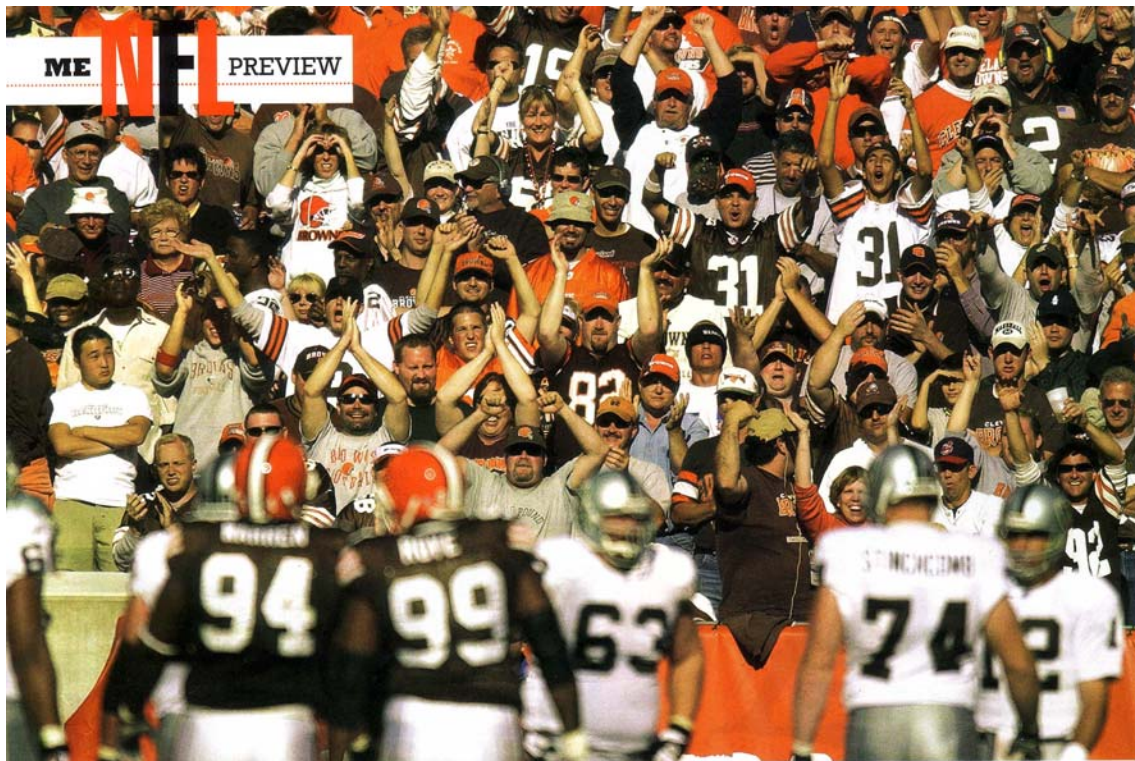


PHOTO BY DAVID MAXWELL/GETTY IMAGES

ME N I PREVIEW

Browns sideline reporter Casey Coleman has been a Browns fan as long as he can remember. His dad – legendary sportscaster Ken Coleman – was asked by coach Brown to come to Cleveland in 1952, shortly before Casey's first birthday. Casey grew up with the team, spending summers as a ball boy for the Browns in training camp. "Football is a sport that fits this town to a T," says Coleman. "It's a tough, physical, gridiron kind of sport – and let's face it, if you live in Cleveland, you've gotta be tough."

After 26 years reporting on and traveling with the team, Coleman is still surprised by the sheer number of fans – sometimes a few hundred – who wait around the hotel all day in an away city just for an opportunity to bark at the players for 30 seconds as they charge through the lobby. Casey's dad spent the bulk of his career covering the Red Sox. "In New England, where the Red Sox are a religion, it still doesn't rival the passion that people have for the Browns," he says. "The more you love something, the more disappointed you are when you're betrayed by it."

THEY'RE EVERYWHERE

All NFL teams have fan clubs, and even Clevelanders will tip a hat to the dedication of their counterparts in Green Bay, Chicago, St. Louis and Buffalo. But few clubs can match the size and scope of Browns Backers. More than 255 Backers clubs operate globally, and the organization boasts a legion of almost 40,000 registered members. In Vienna, it's the Barkin' by the Alps Browns Backers; in Israel, look up the Holy Devoted

Biblical Browns Backers in Erfat. Australia, Africa, Egypt and Iraq all have clubs.

Actor Martin Mull, who once had an opportunity to suit up and kick a field goal for the Browns (his life's dream), is a Backer. "When I got to see the Browns in San Diego, there was more orange and noise for the Browns than there was for San Diego," he says. "Browns fans don't stop being fans when they move."

Mull often is recognized more for his love of the team than for his acting stints on *Roseanne* and other shows. "I go to restaurants and the maitre d' will say something like, 'What do you think about them getting [quarterback Jeff] Garcia?' It's like an odd code that only Browns fans understand."

"This is the cradle of football," notes Coleman. "Organized football was created in Canton; Massilon High School built a stadium to seat 30,000; you've got OSU just down the road."

It's no wonder the town is nuts for the game. But keeping it that way might take some doing.

The team has its new stadium, but hasn't really been producing. As the coaches coalesce and develop a strategy, the fans wait with baited breath, sipping beer and dreaming as the season gets underway. "The fans have been loving the team for so many years," says Huler. "But the team has to do something now. They have to realize how lucky they are to have those fans, and then something will happen."

And if something does happen, then maybe this is the year Clevelanders can tell Disappointment to pack its bags and move to Baltimore, where it belongs. **ME**

ULTIMATE FANS

PRO FOOTBALL'S ULTIMATE FANS

Association (www.footballfans.com) was created in 1999, the first year of the Visa Hall of Fans promotion at the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Kansas City Chiefs fan Monte "Arrowman" Short and his wife liked communing with their counterparts so much, they founded the association to "promote the fellowship of all fans, encourage sportsmanship and support charitable activities." Here are some of the most notorious Hall of Famers:

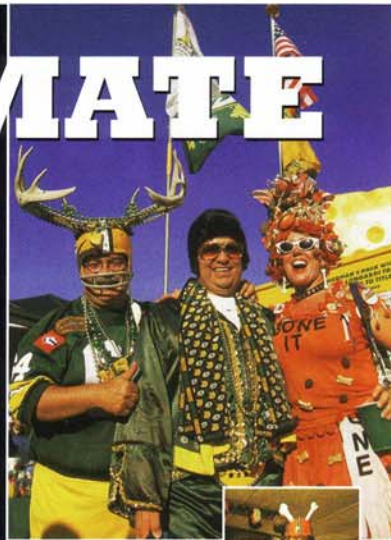


PHOTO BY JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES

Larry "Packalope" Primeau and Debra "Bone Lady" Darnall, with unknown Elvis. Inset: John "Big Dawg" Thompson



- **John "Big Dawg" Thompson:** When the Browns started barking at the fans, John "Big Dawg" Thompson and his buddies in the bleachers reacted by bringing dog bones to the field and dressing up like canines. Big Dawg is now the Dog Pound's alpha-male at Browns Stadium.
- **Len Orme:** This Cincinnati fan drives a van painted with the team colors, and hopes to be buried in a Bengals coffin.
- **Ted "Steelman" Gouza:** Turned his home into a shrine to Steelers football. Even the cue sticks on his Steelers-themed pool table bear the team logo.
- **Larry "Packalope" Primeau:** Attached a six-point deer rack to a vintage 1960s Packers helmet, and the rest is history. The Packalope Cheese Army Fan Club raises thousands of dollars every year for charity.
- **Debra "Bone Lady" Darnall:** Perhaps the sexiest of the team supporters, "Bone Lady" Darnall got herself a beehive wig, decorated a kitschy dress with Cleveland Brown's stuff, lacquered her car with team memorabilia, and strapped a big bone to the top of her car.
- **Mikey T. "Boss Hogette" Torbert:** Torbert first put on a dress and a pig's snout to cheer up his grandmother. Soon, he had a band of Hogette's following him to Washington Redskins games and collecting money; they've raised millions for charity.