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Psychologist: Braves suffering from culture shock

Others say team's road woes are just a fluke

By JILL VEJNOSKA
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Was it something in the water in Milwaukee?

Not enough Chipper Chardonnay available for post-game sipping in Cincinnati?

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What is causing the Braves' struggles on the road?

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It's physical
They're just not very good

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Could Frenchy at least consider packing his favorite teddy bear before heading out on this latest road trip?

The Atlanta Braves play at Wrigley Field Tuesday, kicking off a 10-game odyssey to Chicago, , Anaheim, Denver and Arlington, Texas. Hopefully,Jekyll-and-Hyde Land's gone from the itinerary.

Talk about carrying excess baggage! Despite last weekend's sweep by the Phillies, the Braves boast the second-best home record in the National League. But their 7-21 road record ranks them dead last among 30 teams.

Athletic agoraphobia abounds this spring. Still, how to explain the ultra-professional Braves reacting like homesick kids their first time at sleepaway camp?

Hawks.

"They may be maximizing the differences between playing at home and away," said Dr. John M. Silva, a professor of sports psychology at the University of North Carolina. Unlike the physical rigors of travel, this creeping mindset "[is] where the athlete's thinking, 'Oh, God, we're going on the road. I don't play well there, I hate to travel.'"

There may actually be a psychological term for these road woes.

"I want to call it a 'Sports Travel Sub-Culture Shock,'" suggested Michael Brein, aka "The Travel Psychologist." Social psychologist Brein sees some parallels between visitors to unfamiliar cultures and traveling athletes encountering big, fuzzy, noogie-dispensing mascots and mother-insulting fans.

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"In a mini, subtle, way, they're sort of going through all the facets of culture shock, which is affecting their play."

Unless they're not. Even these experts concede this situation could be a perfect storm combination of balls lost in the sun, bad burritos eaten in the visitors' clubhouse and countless other things all happening at once, and only away from home.

"I think it's just a statistical fluke," said Pete Van Wieren, the longtime Braves broadcaster who once moonlighted as the team's traveling secretary.

"You're going to have a year every once in a while where teams don't play well on the road. There's no rhyme or reason to it." Van Wieren says that this is the worst road year overall for MLB teams since 1931. Only 2 of 16 National League teams are playing above .500 away from home.

When UNC's Silva and colleagues studied ACC basketball results several years ago: "We didn't find a home court advantage, we found an away court *disadvantage*." What the researchers attributed to "visiting teams coming into a hostile environment with a tremendous amount of noise and distractions," Braves' fans can shorthand as "Shea Stadium."

Road schedules are better now than when the Braves flew commercial, but worse now that TV, interleague and international play give the schedule an "If it's Tuesday, this must be a night game in Tokyo" feel.

"Now, you can be playing at any time of the day, anywhere," Van Wieren said. "Every team is in the same boat, but I think it just wears you out a little bit."

Experts sometimes suggest that young campers bring along a favorite stuffed animal to avoid homesickness. Since that's unlikely to happen — or be admitted to — here, Brein said the Braves might want to "carefully interview" players if the road woes grow.

"In terms of both the travel experience itself and their attitudes towards the places they've been, you'd want to try and find what differences or factors may be related to success versus failure," Brein said.

But some extra *Chipper Chardonnay* on the team charter couldn't hurt.

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