A matter of depth perception

I am bothered, often, by New Yorkers and their views of the Midwest. Having lived for many years in the Northeast, I have intimate knowledge of how admirable they think we are, with our “nice people” and “cows” and lack of Jerseys Shore and Woody’s Alleys.

But what troubles me today is this: Effete New Yorkers can look up from their al fresco haute coffee, cast a disinterested glance at Chicago and the blizzard that just ran through it and say “Ha! We’ve had a blizzard and a major snowstorm.”

Text us when you’ve caught up.

That’s not supposed to happen. If there’s one thing Chicago can always beat New York in, it’s weather. We are a tough, snowbound city. We laugh at the thought of New Yorkers surviving one of our winters.

But the numbers don’t lie. Central Park has more than 7 inches on Chicago when it comes to total snowfall this season, a statistic made worse by the fact that Chicago normally averages about 17 inches more snow than New York City.

Set aside your opinions on pizza or culture—we’re losing the battle of snow, and with it one of our trump cards over those insufferable Manhattanites and their early move premieres and star-studded galas and pinstriped baseball team that wins too much. New York has even been catching up in Illinois in corrupt governors, although, mathematically speaking, it takes three Eliot Spitzers to equal one Rod Blagojevich.

The good news is, winter isn’t over. We still have a fighting chance, but it’s incumbent upon Chicagoans to pray for snow to stop heating their homes (radiating heat is melting the snowpack) and to stay true to our state’s political traditions by finding a way to game the system.

To that end, I turned to WGN meteorologist Tom Skilling for advice on how we can narrow the snow gap.

He began by speaking in gibberish, using made-up terms like “the negative phase of the North Atlantic Oscillation” and “jet stream.”

Once I got him back on track, Skilling said a warm pool of air around Greenland has been causing unusual weather patterns across North America. Storm systems developing in the South have swept up into the North, this winter, bringing with them larger amounts of snowfall and putting our reputation as snow champions up on the line.

I pressed Skilling for a solution, and we tossed around a few ideas.

Richard Deoley could, in one of his last acts as mayor, send the clouds over Chicago to create more snow. Oprah Winfrey could have snow airlifted in from the Swiss Alps and dumped on the city thus simulating a major snowstorm.

“I’m sure we in the weather community could look the other way,” Skilling said. “That would count.”

Finally we agreed—or at least I agreed—that the most practical way for Chicago to catch up to New York is to put Rahm Emanuel atop the Ferris wheel at Navy Pier and have him yell at the sky until it starts snowing.

“If there’s anybody who can yell at the sky and get the sky to precipitate, it may be Rahm,” Skilling said. “Hats off to him if he can get us past New York. We can’t let them beat us.”

This potential snow-barrage strategy will undoubtedly now become a hot-button issue in Chicago’s mayoral race. I asked Alan Gitelson, a political science professor at Loyola University Chicago, if the ability to handle snow is a significant qualification for becoming mayor of Chicago.

“It is incredibly enormously absolutely important,” he said. “There’s no way around it. The biggest lesson we learned was during the major snowstorm (of 1979) in which Michael Bilandic was mayor. He was severely damaged politically by how that snowstorm was handled.”

So, if cleaning up after a snowstorm is such a big deal, shouldn’t mayoral candidates also have to prove they can generate snow to maintain Chicago’s winter bragging rights over the inhabitants of a small, insignificant island off the coast of Hoboken, N.J.?

“That’s really one of the dumbest things I’ve ever heard,” Gitelson said. “It’s clearly sad that he didn’t think of it first.”

Bill Savage, a senior lecturer in the English department at Northwestern University and an expert on Chicago history and culture, said that in the absence of any more significant snowfall—either naturally occurring or candidate-induced—the city could fall back on its grand tradition of cheating.

“T’m pretty sure we could just truck some of the snow we’ve got from different neighborhoods, find out the spot at O’Hare where they do the measurements and just add some as needed,” Savage said. “Just have a guy with a wheelbarrow out there. Instead of cooking the vote, let’s cook the measurement of the snow.”

Bingo.

Let those New Yorkers have their pristine, white, natural snow, delivered in blue Tiffany bags by tuxedo-clad weathermen.

Chicago will always come out on top. Because our snow is as deep—and as dirty—as we say it is.