The last time the Browns and Falcons played was the final game of the 2002 regular season, and it was a home win by the Browns that secured their only playoff spot of the new era of Browns football. Four years have passed, but the key to defeating the Falcons has remained the same - stop Michael Vick and the vaunted Falcon running attack. The Hornless Rhino is here with his preview of this afternoon's Browns game.

*Visit the Vinny & The Hornless Rhino weblog at www.vinnyandthehornlessrhino.blogspot.com/*

The Browns visit the Atlanta Falcons this weekend. Remember the last time they played Atlanta? It was one of the very few good days that we've had since the team returned. The Browns have been so bad that it's easy to forget that they made the playoffs back in 2002, and it was a home victory over the Falcons that got them there.

Of course, that happy memory is tainted by the Browns quick exit from the playoffs the following week, after they managed to blow a 17 point 4th quarter lead to the Steelers. That game not only put a real damper on the buzz we were all feeling after the Buckeyes' Fiesta Bowl triumph, but also revealed what a creep Butch Davis was. Butch, as you remember, threw defensive coordinator Foge Fazio under the bus for that loss--even though it was reportedly Davis' overruling of Fazio that allowed Pittsburgh to get back into the game in the first place.

If the reports about Butch's next coaching position are true, all I can say is enjoy the hell out of him, Tar Heel fans. He'll coach his guts out for ya.

Isn't it great to be a Browns fan? I haven't even talked about this week's game yet and my blood pressure is already in the danger zone. Anyway, the key to a Cleveland win this week is the same as it is for any team playing Atlanta. If you want to beat the Falcons, you better figure out a way to stop Michael Vick. Sure, Atlanta has other weapons, but controlling Vick-- Ron Mexico
to his intimate friends--has to be the Browns' top priority.

Vick ranks among the top 10 rushers in the NFC with 576 yards and an astounding 8.2 yards per carry, and he's on a pace to break Bobby Douglass' single season QB rushing record. But this year, stopping Vick sometimes means more than shutting down the run. Vick's

shown signs of maturing as a passer, although he's still inconsistent. For example, after lighting up the Steelers and the Bengals for seven passing touchdowns and nearly 550 yards in back-to-back games, he threw for less than 200 yards and had two passes intercepted against the Lions last week.

Vick's not the Falcons only offensive threat. Warrick Dunn is having another stellar year, and currently ranks 5th in the NFC with 688 yards and a 4.5 yards per carry average. With both Vick and Dunn in the backfield, it's no surprise that the Falcons lead the NFL in rushing with an incredible 205 yards per game. TE Alge Crumpler is tied for 3rd in the NFC with six touchdown receptions, and former Buckeye WR Michael Jenkins has caught three touchdown passes of his own.

Stopping the running game isn't exactly one of the Browns' strengths, so on the surface, it looks like this could be a very long afternoon. It might well turn out that way, but if you want a reason to hope otherwise, consider the fact that the Falcons' productivity on the ground has plummeted over the past three weeks. Through the season's first five games, Atlanta was averaging over 230 yards on the ground. Over the past three games, that's dropped to 160 yards per game.

The biggest reason for the drop-off in the Falcons' running game appears to be a decision to throw the ball more, but that may have resulted from the absence of guard Matt Lehr, who is serving a four game steroid suspension. The Falcons' line was further depleted during the Lions game, when guard Kynan Forney was lost for the season with a shoulder injury. Furthermore, Warrick Dunn's backup, Jerious Norwood, has a knee injury and is questionable for Sunday. Ordinarily, that's kind of a "so what?" but Norwood's not exactly your average backup. The rookie from Mississippi State has rushed for 355 yards and is averaging almost seven yards per carry. Combine these injuries with Alge Crumpler's sore ankle, and there's reason to think that if the Browns can't stop the Falcons, they at least might be able to slow them down some.

Slowing down the Falcons' offense just might give the Browns a chance, because this is one of the rare weeks when the Browns may be able to get something going on offense. That's because Atlanta's decent against the run, it's pass defense is downright porous. The Falcons rank 31st overall in passing defense, and it isn't because they don't have a pass rush. The Falcons have a respectable 21 sacks; they just can't cover anybody. Teams are completing 61% of their passes against the Falcons and the team's already given up almost 2,000 yards passing.

I'd feel a lot better about this game if the Falcons weren't coming off an upset loss to the Lions and the Browns weren't so banged up themselves. I don't think the Falcons are as good

as their record indicates, but I think that with the home field advantage and the poor performance against the Lions as motivation, the Browns will be hard pressed to bring home a victory.

Falcons 31, Browns 23.