To be a sports fan is often to live in the sometimes conflicting and complementary worlds of cynicism and denial. The more our teams disappoint us, the more cynical we become about their prospects. Yet we also deny the underlying reasons they disappoint, holding them to subjective standards they often aren't capable of achieving.

In Cleveland, these attitudes coexist, running deep, wide and long. To be a Cleveland fan is to be a cynic based simply on the almost complete lack of success by any of its three major franchises. No coach gets hired, no trade gets made, no player gets transacted without it invoking some sort of cynicism.

Yet despite the cynicism they embrace and endure in Cleveland the fans remain hopeless romantics in deep denial over a what it would take to make them less cynical in the first place. Instead we expect success simply because there are players wearing the name "Cleveland" on their jerseys.

This brings us to the Cleveland Browns, poised as they are to start another season of wrongheaded hopes and all-too-familiar failures. If ever a team balanced cynicism with optimism, it's the Browns.

Listening to fans talk about the prospects of the Browns after the first two completely meaningless preseason games engendered just those wrongheaded hopes while the third

preseason game, the supposed dress rehearsal for the regular season, drove home all the various reasons that despite our deepest wishes, this season likely will do nothing to eradicate our abiding sense of cynicism about the team, a new owner notwithstanding.

Let's be unvarnished about last week for a moment. The turgid performance of the Browns against the Eagles was exactly what it was intended to be, a dress rehearsal for what the regular season will mostly look like.

What, you thought Brandon Weeden was Cam Newton because both were drafted in the first round? Suddenly the receiving corps became Al Toon, Jerry Rice, Terrell Owens and Ozzie Newsome in their prime? As near as my aging eyes can see, Weeden has looked like exactly what he is: a rookie with a good arm and an almost complete lack of understanding of how the pro game really operates. The receivers are mostly untested and issue-ridden and still trying to decide how to elude the kind of corners they rarely faced in college.

But yet since Weeden drops back to pass and has the title "quarterback," we expect to see the kind of results that take at least a few years and that's assuming the best of circumstances, which this hardly qualifies as. And because the Browns line up three wide with players labeled "receiver," we unreasonably expect immediate proficiency at route running and ball catching. Heck, they haven't even learned how to get open on a consistent basis.

That's why this all begs serving up still another in an endless series of reminders that this team isn't very good and when it fails to achieve it's not because head coach Pat Shurmur didn't get the most out of them, even if that's part of it. It's because they weren't that good in the first place.

This is not to suggest that this team isn't on the right track. You can see the progress in the players being developed. Indeed, there is ample evidence to suggest that the roster is improving and that it is deeper then it was at any time in the last several seasons. But an improving roster doesn't mean it's good roster yet and certainly not a roster capable of going toe to toe with the better teams in the league week in and week out.

If you watched the offensive line, for example, get run over against the Eagles defensive line it was a sobering reminder that Weeden is just a blown assignment away from a concussion,

sooner rather than later. Then if you listened, cynically, to the excuses offered up by the offensive line to explain said performance it just made you realize this will be another long season with earnest players trying hard to overcome their essential mediocrity.

I'm not a big fan of predicting a team's record. It matters little, except in the drafting pecking order, whether the Browns finish 3-13, 4-12 or 5-11. Nothing about any of those records is particularly impressive and any of those are the likely outcomes based simply on this team's over reliance on rookies and its still serious lack of depth at any position and consequent heightened vulnerability to the inevitable injuries.

What will make this season interesting and hence make me less cynical about the team's future depends on the smaller battles game by game. The questions this team needs to answer in terms of whether it's really getting better (and, concurrently, whether it still makes any sense to put faith in the current regime) will depend on whether it can find ways to improve its production on both offense and defense.

Can the team improve its running game? Trent Richardson seems like a good edition, if healthy, but even he'll have trouble running if the line plays like it did against the Eagles. If the run blocking doesn't improve, quickly, there's virtually no chance that the run game will improve and, by extension, no chance that the passing game will get better, even if Tom Heckert were to pull off a trade for Tom Brady. Weeden won't have enough time to throw to the rookies charged with catching the ball and lacks the mobility needed on a consistent basis to slow down a pass rush that doesn't fear the run.

Can the run defense improve? Heading into the season this was a question mark before Phil Taylor got hurt. It's just a bigger question mark and it doesn't inspire confidence for the option to be rotating rookies who think that they'll create havoc because they'll have fresh legs. The run defense has been an embarrassment for years and has forced the secondary to play up to stop big runs (which it's done with only modest success). When the secondary is up in the box, you know what comes next. And as we've seen, this secondary gives up a lot of long pass plays.

An improved running game and run defense may not translate into more victories, yet, but it will eventually as long as that course remains pursued. But if this turns into another season where the offense can't move the ball and the defense can't ever control the line of scrimmage, then the flood gates of cynicism will remain open for business.