When is a winning streak something that fans can believe in, rather than just a mirage that helps to mask a team's ongoing problems?

Just as importantly, how can you tell the difference?

That's the question facing everyone surrounding the Cleveland Browns, from the front office to the locker room all the way down to the fans.

It's not a surprise, really, that Browns fans are struggling to decide what the current team's three-game winning streak really means – after all, we don't see a lot of winning here in Cleveland.

Is this a sign that the Browns, 5-3 over their past eight games, have finally turned the corner after starting the year at 0-5? How about if they win out to go 8-3 over the season's final 11 games? While probably unrealistic for this team, it is still hypothetically on the table.

Should those 11 games count more than the 21 games – when the Browns were 4-17 – that preceded them?

Those are the questions James Haslam and CEO Joe Banner must answer and they, more

than anyone, need to get the answers right.

Not surprisingly, coach Pat Shurmur thinks the team is finally on the right track.

“I’m happy for our guys that we’re finding a way to do it now,” Shurmur said . “I’m going to spend time adding all this stuff up at the end. I’m just happy for our guys and our coaches. I knew there was going to be some tough days. I knew two years ago when I got here there were going to be some tough days. Fortunately, in the last few weeks we found a way to have some good stuff happen.

“I think once you see something happen over and over then of course it’s easier for me to stand there in front of the team and say, ‘You know what guys, we can do this.’ It’s an easier sell. Even though I believe it when it’s not happening, or you’re getting to the point where you need to have it happen consistently, once they feel it then they get it right in their minds then they have a better chance to do it.”

The players are starting to believe as well, which in some ways is even more important than the coaches, since it’s more likely a large number of the players will be around in the coming years.

“I can get used to this,” said kicker Phil Dawson , who has seen it all (literally) since the team returned in 1999. “I caught some heat a couple months ago saying I feel like we were right on the verge. My timing might have been a little off, but I think we’re starting to see what I’ve been feeling for awhile.”

“(The win streak is) a testament to this football team, to these guys in that locker room that have continued to buy in,” quarterback Brandon Weeden said. “Early in the year we faced a lot of adversity and we weren’t winning many games, but I’ve think we’ve stayed true to what we do. We prepare well every week, guys are still enthusiastic. It’s paid off. We’ve found a way to win these last three weeks.”

So the coaches and the players believe, but what about the fans?

While winning is always better than losing, it is still hard for many fans to get behind this current winning streak – and even those that have are still cautious – mainly because we've seen this before and walked away disappointed.

This is the fourth time that the Browns have won at least three consecutive games since returning to the NFL in 1999. And, so far, each streak has two things in common.

The first is the quality of the opposition the Browns have beaten during each streak.

In 2001, the Browns lost their opening game (naturally) before running off three straights wins to move to 3-1 and ignite playoff talk in just their third season. Who'd they beat? Try Detroit with Ty Detmer at quarterback, Jacksonville with Mark Brunnel (respectable) and San Diego with Doug Flutie. (Didn't see that one coming, did you?)

In 2007, the Browns ripped off three in a row on their way to a 10-6 season. They beat Miami and Cleo Lemon, handing the Dolphins their ninth consecutive defeat; St. Louis and Marc Bulger, during an 0-8 start to a season that would see the Rams finish at 3-13, and Seattle (in overtime) with Matt Hasselbeck.

The 2009 season brought us the infamous four-game winning streak at the end of the year. That year's list included Pittsburgh with Ben Roethlisberger, during a four-game losing streak by the Steelers; Kansas City with Matt Cassel, in a game where the Browns needed to special teams touchdowns from Josh Cribbs to squeak by a Chiefs team that would finish the year at 4-12; Oakland with Charlie Frye (there's that surprise quarterback again) during a 5-11 season from the Raiders; and Jacksonville with David Garrard during the Jaguars four-game losing streak to end the year.

That brings us to this year, with a winning streak built against Charlie Batch and Pittsburgh, Carson Palmer and a three-win Oakland team, and Sunday's win over Brady Quinn and a two-win Kansas City team.

Go back through that list and you'll see there wasn't a lot of high-end talent on the other of the field for most of those wins.

So how much of the current winning streak should be attributed to the coaches? And while confidence from the players can go a long way, the easier schedule the past few weeks has to be accounted for as well, doesn't it?

The second common theme is the fact that those winning streaks, rather than propelling the Browns forward, all ended up being pretty meaningless.

After that 3-1 start in 2001, the Browns went 4-8 the rest of the year. The 2007 squad missed the playoffs and started the next season 0-3 on their way to a 4-12 record. And the mirage of the 2009 winning streak faded away during a 1-5 start to the 2010 season.

While it is possible (likely?) that this year's team will follow the same path as its predecessors, what if this time it is different? What if this Browns team is more like the one from 1985?

That Browns team also had a three-game winning streak in the same stretch of the season as the current club, in a season the culminated in an 8-8 record and a division title. The '85 team was transitioning from an older roster and were led by a rookie quarterback who was just starting to find his way in the NFL.

Sound familiar to anyone?

The problem with playing "What If" is you never know until it's too late if you are looking back at the right decade. The Cleveland Indians want fans to think it is the late '90s all over again at Progressive Field, while in reality we are seeing a rebirth of the Tribe teams from the late 1970s.

What if this current winning streak by the Browns is not a sign of progress, but rather just the happy coincidence of catching a break in the schedule for three consecutive weeks? What if a

strong finish to the 2012 season doesn't turn into a better 2013?

The wild card in all this, of course, if Shurmur. While there is no magic number of wins that should guarantee him a third year in Cleveland (nor should there be), it's hard to deny that the Browns still are playing hard for Shurmur (no 58-0 beat downs like we saw over the weekend with Arizona).

But it is equally as hard to overlook that 4-17 start to Shurmur's tenure and the circumstances surrounding the team's recent improved won-loss mark.

Last week on Sirius NFL Radio, Tim Ryan and Pat Kirwan were talking about Shurmur's future in Cleveland. They brought up the point that, if you are going to hire a first-time head coach, you have to be willing to live with the growing pains that come along with that hire. If you are not willing to do that, they pointed out, then why hire an inexperienced coach in the first place?

It's a good point, but with one flaw: Haslam and Banner did not hire Shurmur and their opinions are the only ones that count.

"If you spend that kind of money, you can do what the hell you want to do," cornerback Sheldon Brown said. "You can blow up anything. But I would feel bad for the young guys because there's something to be said when a guy like (Tom) Heckert drafted you and a guy like Pat Shurmur is on board for you. When there's a new face, you don't know if that guy is for you. You don't know if he really believes in you. So you're always going to be walking down the hall looking over your back because you don't know."

It's quite possible that Haslam and Banner have already made up their minds about Shurmur's future and nothing will change the inevitable.

Until that day comes, maybe the best thing to do is just enjoy watching the Browns play each week. There are only three games left in the season and, for the first time in a long time, the Browns are actually giving fans something worth watching on a Sunday afternoon in December.

While that may not be the Christmas miracle that many Browns fans are looking for, it may be good enough for now.

(Photo by The Plain Dealer)