Now eight years into the rebirth of the Cleveland Browns franchise, the team has an abysmal 40-84 win-loss record over that time span. Players and coaches have come and gone, and the only constant (besides Phil Dawson) through that stretch has been the ownership of the Lerner family. In his latest, Gary Benz makes a good point: ownership never seems to get the blame for the inferior product. And ultimately, the people at the top should be the ones held responsible.

In considering the Cleveland Browns in general and not, necessarily, with respect to any particular game, the thought emerged that the Lerners, if not the worst owners in the NFL, might actually be the least successful. And if that's true, then why is their stewardship, like, number 38 on the list of the 40 things wrong with this franchise?

If you like your surprises on the mild side, then read on. Eliminating the Houston Texans from the equation since they came into the league in 2002, the Cleveland Browns actually do not have the worst record since 1999, the year they returned from the league. That distinction of merit goes to the Bidwell family-owned Arizona Cardinals, but by only the slightest of margins. Cleveland is second and tied with its twin-son-of-a-different-mother, Detroit, for the second worst record during that time. In fact, the next worst team after these three miserable franchises is Cincinnati. While not a surprise itself, it is noteworthy at least that they have won a whopping 10 more games during this time period. In other words, while Cincinnati and a handful of others have been really lousy during this period, they're not even close to sinking to the depths of Arizona, Cleveland and Detroit.

In alphabetical order and by conference, here are the winning percentages for all NFL teams since 1999 and through the first twelve games of this season (and excluding Houston):

| AFC Record | Winning Percentage | NFC Record | Winning Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Baltimore | 77-37 | .620 | Arizona |
| Buffalo | 55-69 | .443 | Atlanta |
| Cleveland | 40-84 | .322 | Chicago |
| Denver | 74-70 | .596 | Dallas |
| Indianapolis | 87-27 | .701 | Detroit |
| Jacksonville | 66-58 | .532 | Green Bay |
| Kansas City | 67-57 | .540 | Minnesota |
| Miami | 68-57 | .548 | New Orleans |
| New England | 80-44 | .645 | NY Giants |
| NY Jets | 63-61 | .508 | Philadelphia |
| Oakland | 56-68 | .451 | Seattle |
| Pittsburgh | 75-39 | .604 | San Francisco |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| San Diego | 57-67 | .459 | St. Louis |
| Tennessee | 70-54 | .564 | Tampa Bay |
| Cincinnati | 50-74 | .403 | Washington |

There are all sorts of quirky conclusions you can draw from this chart, but one our favorite non-Cleveland observations is that both the Jets and the Giants have exactly the same record during this time period. In a metro area where perceived supremacy over something, anything is critical to the collective psyche, not only have both teams been decidedly average, fans of one team can't even assume bragging rights over fans of the other. Talk about feeding one's neuroses.

But getting back to the main point, if you want to take this simple analysis a step further and consider Cleveland's record since its return vs. the first five years of the other most recent expansion teams, it looks like this:

| **Team** | **Record** | **Winning Percentage** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cleveland | 26-54 | .325 | |
| Houston | 22-54 (note: 5th | | season not yet comple |
| Jacksonville | 49-31 | .612 | |
| Carolina | 38-42 | .475 | |

We applaud the Browns for their unrivaled consistency since their return. The Romeo Crennel/Phil Savage era is simply keeping with the trend. Actually, if you want to quibble, take note that the Butch Davis era, so despised as it was, was actually the veritable salad days for the reincarnated franchise. And let's not lose site of the fact that Houston has suffered similarly. They need to win their last four games this year simply to be as bad as Cleveland. If you're into drawing parallels, remember that Chris Palmer worked for both franchises. We won't connect

those dots but won't stop anyone inclined to do so.

But being an expansion team doesn't automatically equate to indeterminate purgatory, either, as the table above shows. Both Jacksonville and Carolina prove that failure need not be a foregone conclusion and that fans be sentenced to an endless loop of frustration. There are some differences in the situations of course; the most notable of which was that both Jacksonville and Carolina were given significantly longer lead times to start their franchises. But all that demonstrates, at most, is that Jacksonville and Carolina had a head start toward respectability. It still doesn't excuse the fact that in Cleveland, we may see the light at the end of the tunnel, but it's not the light of respectability but the light of another on-coming runaway train. The Browns and in particular the Lerners have had plenty of time to overcome whatever disadvantage the NFL threw at them and simply haven't done so.

In turn, this simply steers us back to what started this all in the first place, the relative success of the Lerners.

To be blunt, the Lerners have been failures as owners. They aren't necessarily bad owners as long as that definition continues to be reserved for owners prone to public displays of boorish behavior, like Jerry Jones or Dan Snyder. But neither have the Lerners been successful, except if measured by their desire to bring and keep a franchise in Cleveland.

What chafes the most is that their failure continues the unmistakable trend in Cleveland sports that failure seems pre-ordained. This is best illustrated by looking at the bottom tier. It shouldn't be a surprise, for example, that the Lions aren't successful. It's not as if the Ford family, which owns the Lions, has had any grand success in their namesake company to transfer over to the franchise. Likewise the Cardinals. They've been owned by the Bidwell family for 74 years and in that time have had a winning record only 19 times, or about 25% of the time. Look up the definition of "success" in your dictionary and under antonyms you'll see a picture of the Bidwell family. It's too early to tell about the Texans and owner Bob McNair but if you're sitting in Houston you can't like the trend.

But the real surprise is the Browns, frankly. The Lerners, particularly Al Lerner, wouldn't seem to fit in this group. They have had nothing but unqualified success in the business world. They've made billions and have, by most accounts, been good solid citizens (and until proven otherwise, we'll assume that Al Lerner's role in facilitating the whole Cleveland to Baltimore thing was merely a clever ploy to wrest away the hometown Browns from the clutches of financially and morally bankrupt Art Modell and his idiot son David in order to preserve its long-term viability here). But in this endeavor, the one most Clevelanders care about, the Lerners are abject failures.

We don't believe in curses but this seems like more of the same for Clevelanders. We finally seem to get a successful, well-capitalized owner who understands the civic responsibilities that go with owning a pro franchise in this town and they pick now to fail.

There's still time, of course, for Randy Lerner to turn this legacy around. And the reasons for those failures have been well chronicled. But when considering the bigger picture we don't like the signs. Randy Lerner seems easily manipulated by office politics and has yet to land on a business plan or a front office that gives anyone confidence that sustained success is within two light years of the horizon. To make matters worse, he's now off trying to make his name in English soccer of all places. But if past be prologue, English soccer fans are in for a rude awakening. Hopefully Lerner will remember that if there's anything surlier then a Dawg Pound denizen 15 beers into the fourth quarter of another beat down by a divisional rival, it's an English soccer fan on his way to church.