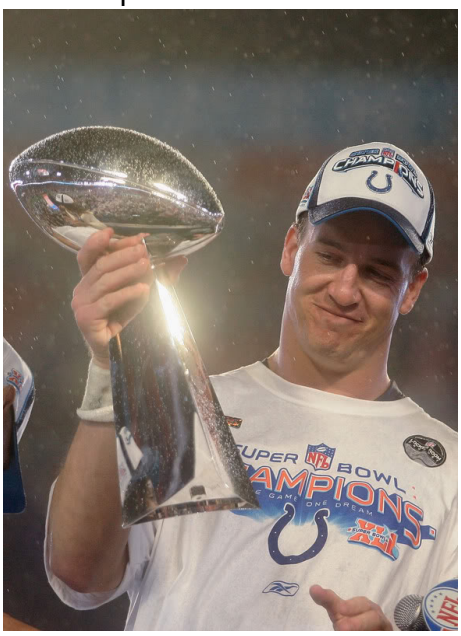
To Gary Benz, yesterday's Super Bowl served as a sobering reminder as to exactly just how far the Browns still are away from competing for a championship. In his latest, he asks the question: how many players currently on the Browns roster could start for the Bears or Colts? Gary doesn't doubt that fan optimism will return with the start of free agency and April's draft. But he stresses to practice realism over optimism as we head into a 2007 season likely to once again be rough on Browns fans.



Almost the second after the Indianapolis Colts put the finishing touches on their victory over the Chicago Bears in Super Bowl XLI, oddsmakers employed by the various sports books in Las Vegas installed San Diego as the prohibitive favorite for next year's Super Bowl. This probably shows a bit too much optimism in Marty Schottenheimer given his track record, but on the other hand ... a flipped coin can't keep coming up tails, can it?

More interesting than the favorite, though, is where our beloved Cleveland Browns figure in next year's pecking order among gamblers. Without even knowing which free agents might be signed and then injured or which players might be chosen in the draft and then left unsigned until the third week of training camp, the sports books have made Cleveland and the other dregs of the league 100-1 shots to win the Super Bowl. Frankly, that seems too optimistic.

If you think that is an overly negative view, then sit back and replay Sunday's Super Bowl in your head. As you consider the players for each team, try and determine which members of the current Browns roster could start for either Chicago or Indianapolis. It matters little which player or players you want to argue about for the truth is that there may be one or two, perhaps three, that could possibly crack the starting lineups of either of this year's Super Bowl participants.

And that should tell you everything you need to know about how far the Browns are from being a legitimate competitor in the NFL.

Assuming Browns owner Randy Lerner wasn't in England with his soccer team and at watched at least some of this year's Super Bowl, he can't be happy with this stark reality. After all the advantages, after all the early round draft picks, after all of the organization and reorganization of the front office and coaching staff, the Cleveland Browns sit as far away from the Super Bowl as at any time in the history of this franchise, and that includes the years when no football was even being played on the lakefront.

Given Lerner's management approach to date, the pressure of this reality lands squarely on the shoulders of General Manager Phil Savage. Perhaps that's why Savage decided to keep Romeo Crennel. That could be just another battle for another day. When he looks at his roster and sees just how far away the Browns really are, acquiring talent is jobs one through 45.

The tendency of Cleveland sports fans is to swing wildly from emotion to emotion. Given the results of this last season, most Browns fans right now are somewhere between anger and outrage, with a healthy number probably drifting toward abject indifference. Eventually, though, as the free agency period begins to hit its stride and draft choices are made, wide-eyed optimism will return. Browns fans will engage in one of their favorite past times that goes like this: "with another year under his belt, Kellen Winslow should emerge as the best tight end in the AFC. If Chud can harness Braylon Edwards and his attitude, our receiving corps should be one of the strongest in the league. If free agent X or draft choices Y and Z can just come through and with Charlie Frye and Derek Anderson locked in a real battle at QB, we have a real chance to turn this around."

It's great to dream. But it also raises expectations to unrealistic levels and makes the fall even harder to absorb. The point has been made repeatedly, but it is critical that it be revisited often. Of the three Cleveland sports franchises, the Browns are easily in the worst shape. Part of it is due to the fact that football requires more personnel overall and places the most emphasis on that personnel playing together in a much more coordinated fashion. But part of it also is due to the whole litany of poor management that has befallen this franchise since it has returned.

There is speculation that Lerner is considering selling the Browns. But new ownership hardly solves the problem unless it is accompanied by a sea change in attitude. Sunday's Super Bowl may not have been the most exciting or compelling contest ever but hopefully it proved to be instructive to Browns fans and management alike. The Browns simply are not in the conversation in terms of making an impact in the NFL and don't look to be any time soon.

So before anyone even considers wasting a single dollar betting on the Browns Super Bowl odds for next year, remember how you feel right now. And know that your money is better invested in betting the over and under on the number of times Lindsey Lohan will land in rehab in the next two years.