Browns fans have a short memory. Every Autumn Sunday when the Browns are getting their brains beat in, we cry out for the team to draft offensive linemen. Yet, inevitably, when the Super Bowl passes and the draft aproaches, many of inevitably begin to clamor for the more sexy selection. In his latest, Erik Cassano says that the Browns offensive line, as presently constructed, will ruin a young quarterback ... just as it did to Tim Couch. And that's its time for the Browns to take their medicine and address the offensive line high in this years draft.

Far be it from me to give too much credit to a radio sports gabber for being the stone pillar of reason in a field of wildly-swaying wheat, but
WTAM's
Andre
Knott
brought up a good point this past weekend.

Why is it that we so quickly and readily change our tunes with regard to building the Browns, when that's exactly what drives 95 percent of our complaints about team management?

Every Autumn Sunday when the Browns are getting their brains beat in, we cry out for the team to draft offensive linemen. Pregame and postgame, incredulous callers jam radio station phone lines every week, exasperated that Browns management is so dense and/or inept not to see that this slow, flabby, injury-prone collection of has-
beens
is killing the team, and killing any chance of developing a franchise quarterback.

The Browns' offensive line has been so bad in recent years, you'd think our conviction as a fan base would be unwavering. But then the season ends and we don't have to watch the weekly comedy of errors. Then the mock drafts start to appear on Web sites and our mouths start to water at the prospect of nabbing a 6'-6" quarterback with a rocket arm, or a perennial 1,500-yard running back with that high pick.

Then, all of a sudden, that line ... ehh, maybe it can wait after all.

Last week, Tony Lastoria wrote a column in support of not rubber-stamping the Browns'

third or fourth overall pick as an offensive lineman, saying this draft is rich enough in quarterback talent that the Browns should seriously consider taking a signal-caller in the first round. Rich Swerbinsky preceded it with a mock draft in which the Browns take Louisiana State's JaMarcus Russell fourth overall.

I certainly agree that it would be a mistake to say the Browns' first pick should be an offensive lineman or bust. There are numerous other needs on the team, among them quarterback, and Russell is arguably one of the best pure QB talents to come out of college since Peyton Manning. And, as Manning has now proven, a star QB can greatly enhance your chances of winning some hardware. If you give him the tools to work with, that is.

If the Browns' line was even mediocre, I could be convinced that someone like Russell or Brady Quinn would be too tempting to pass on with a top-five pick. But the Browns' line isn't mediocre. It's horrendous. It's actually hazardous for a quarterback or running back to play behind that line when the Steelers or Ravens are throwing blitz after blitz at them.

As has been pointed out by other writers, Charlie Frye was tackled several times this season while handing the ball off. That means you could have counted "One-Mississippi, two-Mississippi," and before you finished "Three-Mississippi," someone from the other team already had Frye in his clutches. That's scary bad.

Facing those odds, what chance does any quarterback, even a phenom, have to develop and reach his potential?

Right now, without a significantly upgraded and significantly younger offensive line, the Browns will ruin Russell, or Quinn, or Troy Smith, just like they ruined Tim Couch. You can draft any of the above and have him sit on the bench for a year, giving him a benefit Couch never had, but what is he really going to learn as he watches Frye, Derek Anderson or a veteran stopgap get driven into the turf like a lawn dart every week?

The ironic thing is, Quinn and Smith have both expressed a strong desire to play for the Browns because they know they won't be glued to the bench behind an entrenched veteran. It's a quick path to starting and NFL stardom, they think. Be careful what you which for, young charges.

Personally, I think the road to the Super Bowl is littered with enough Chris Chandlers, Neil O'Donnells and Rex Grossmans to make me think that the concept of the cornerstone QB is an overrated one throughout the NFL. Sure, none of those guys actually won the Super Bowl, but Kurt Warner and Tom Brady have. Both those guys came from humble NFL beginnings and were plugged into great systems. Warner was the best QB in football from 1999 to 2001 and Brady might already have

his ticket to Canton punched.

Football is a far more interdependent team sport than baseball, which is built around the duel between pitcher and hitter, and basketball, which can be dressed down to the point of one person maneuvering against his or her defender in isolation.

In football, a great quarterback can't be great unless the line is blocking and the receivers are catching. A great receiver can't be great unless the quarterback can get the ball to him, which requires the line to block so the QB has time to deliver the pass. A great running back can't be great unless the line is opening holes and the passing game is working well enough to prevent the opposing defense from stacking eight or nine in the box every play.

That's why one draft pick can't turn the fortunes of your team 180 degrees as it can in the NBA. That's why the whole concept of the "franchise player" in the NFL is very nearly a misnomer.

It might be a bitter pill to swallow if the Browns take Wisconsin tackle Joe Thomas or trade the pick down as Russell, Quinn and Smith fall off the board to other teams. But the most bitter pill of all is the fact that none of those talented QBs would have much of an impact if taken by the Browns in their current state.

The Browns offense is built on quicksand. The only way to pour a concrete foundation is to build a great offensive line that can make even a mediocre quarterback look good. And the only way to do that is to spend multiple high draft picks over the span of several years to form it.

Until they do that, they are going to keep producing an endless stream of Tim Couches. And it will be back to the drawing board, every year.