Erik Cassano wrote an excellent piece a couple days back about the Indians insistence on piecing together their bullpen with risky veterans and reclamation projects. That column, writes Gary Benz, could have just as easily been written about the Browns approach to the offensive line. With the 2007 free agency period set to begin on March 2nd and the college draft set for April 28-29, there is a fair amount of speculation over whether the Browns would consider drafting Wisconsin tackle Joe Thomas. Don

Erik Cassano's column about the Indians' approach to compiling a bullpen, particularly under John Hart and Mark Shapiro, could just have easily been written about the Cleveland Browns and their approach to building an offensive line. The comparison couldn't be more apt.

The bullpen was the Indians biggest problem last season, although infield defense gave it a run for its money. Shapiro went into his usual bag of tricks to try and rectify the situation, meaning he found at-risk players with some measure of past success to plug the gap. As Erik points out, it's a rather questionable philosophy given the bullpen's importance to the team's overall success.

In much the same way, though, the Browns have gone about following a similar strategy for an equally critical component of their own success. Like the bullpen, the success of an offensive line is in inverse proportion to how often it's noticed. The Browns offensive line was noteworthy last year only because of the penalties it caused, the blocks it missed and the sacks it surrendered.

With the 2007 free agency period set to begin on March 2nd and the college draft set for April 28-29, there is a fair amount of speculation over whether the Browns would consider drafting Wisconsin tackle Joe Thomas. Don't bet on it. GM Phil Savage seems squarely from the Ernie Accorsi mode (or Mark Shapiro for comparison's sake) intent on building an offensive line from the scrap heap that is late round picks and undrafted free agents. As that hasn't worked, the Browns have been reduced to the always iffy free agent market.

What is puzzling is why Savage continues down such a well worn path of failure. If you examine all of the Browns drafts since 1980 to last year, the Browns rarely have attempted to legitimately address their chronic needs on the offensive line. They've never once used a first, second or third round pick on a left tackle (or a right tackle for that matter) and what low round picks they've spent in those 20 drafts (excluding the hiatus years) on the offensive line all have been centers.

What is also telling is that when they have spent draft picks on linemen, they've rarely made a good choice. Either such players are more mercurial in nature than most or the Browns are lousy at scouting. Gee, wonder which it is? In most years, the Browns seem to draft one or two linemen, generally in the later rounds. The few starters they've obtained have generally been with late round picks, which is what Savage probably looks at, among others, when crafting his line strategy. But on the other hand, if you're only drafting linemen in the later rounds and your line has been perpetually lousy, eventually someone has to play. Thus Savage ought to simply ignore this rather dubious fact when drawing conclusions.

When it comes to the Browns, defining success is always a moving target. In considering the offensive line and for purposes of illustration, we can define success as a player who has lasted more than two seasons in the NFL. Here then is the list of linemen drafted by the Browns since 1980 that meets this rather generous criteria:

-1982: Mike Baab (5th round)- played 11 seasons

-1983: Bill Contz (5th round)- played 6 seasons

-1983: Paul Farren (12th round)- played 9 seasons

-1987: Gregg Rakoczy (2nd round)- played 6 seasons

-1987: Frank Winters (10th round)-played 16 seasons (only 2 in Cleveland!)

-1991: Ed King (2nd round)-played 6 seasons

-1993: Steve Everitt (1st round)-played 7 seasons

-1993: Herman Arvie (5th round)-played 4 seasons

-2001: Paul Zukauskas (7th round)-played 4 seasons

-2002: Melvin Fowler (3rd round)- still active, with Buffalo

-2002: Joaquin Gonzalez (7th round)-played 4 seasons

-2003: Jeff Faine (1st round)-still active

In perusing this list, easily the most successful lineman drafted by the Browns was Frank Winters. Unfortunately but typical for Cleveland, his success was realized in Green Bay after spending only two years in Cleveland. Second is Mike Baab, who anchored the Browns line in the early and mid-1980s followed closely by Paul Farren. After that, the list is hardly impressive. On the other hand, the list of draft failures is nearly twice as long.

Perhaps because the cupboard was so bare when he got here (and remains so today), Savage has continued the trend of his predecessors, foregoing any effort to use early round picks on linemen. Under Savage the Browns have drafted 3 linemen: Andrew Hoffman (2005, 6th round, now on practice squad); Jonathan Dunn (2005, 7th round, no longer in football); and, Isaac Sowells (2006, 4th round, still on roster).

But sooner or later, this area of critical needs has to be addressed in a more legitimate manner. When you look at all the lineman currently on the Browns roster, a few key facts hit you squarely in the nose. First, except for the aforementioned Sowells, who played sparingly, and Huffman, who is on the practice squad, none were drafted and developed by Cleveland, which is not a surprise given the stats noted above. Second, there are no first round picks on the roster, only two second round picks (LeCharles Bentley, with New Orleans; Cosey Coleman, with Tampa Bay)and two 4th round picks (Nat Dorsey with Miami and Ryan Tucker with St. Louis). The rest were either 6th or 7th round picks or signed as undrafted free agents. While many great lines have been built with players of all backgrounds and stripes, the lack of pedigree by the Browns line probably makes its lack of success inevitable.

Unfortunately, two years in Savage's reign and the cupboard is still so bare that it is difficult to concentrate on any one area. Here's a suggestion: concentrate on one area anyway and make that the offensive line. Trying to fill every hole usually results in filling none of them adequately. The offensive line, the foundation for a team's overall offensive success, has been ignored far too long. All the skill players in the world can't overcome a line that can't block or protect the quarterback. If Joe Thomas isn't the right guy, then find the right guy. This team needs to be rebuilt and it's time that Savage resists historical trends and actually starts building from the bottom up.