Joey Porter is now officially a free agent. And Romeo Crennel has already made his interest in him public. In Gary Benz's latest, he ponders the drama that a Porter signing would create in this town, especially after his much publicized war of words with Kellen Winslow, and the even more scrutinized "apology".

We live in the age of the apology, no doubt.

Rarely does it seem like a day goes by when an athlete doesn't step into it up to his ankles. Tim Hardaway is the most recent but hardly the only example. But it's not Hardaway's recent meltdown that got the juices flowing on this subject. It was the news item that the Browns are considering potentially signing recently released Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker Joey Porter.

According to Mary Kay Cabot's item buried deep in the bowels of the Plain Dealer's Friday sports section, head coach Romeo Crennel indicated that the Browns might very well be interested in bringing Porter to the Browns. Crennel made the comments to Cabot before an autograph session at the Greater Cleveland Auto Show. Cabot probably didn't need to rush and hunt down Crennel before the session as there likely was plenty of downtime during the session as well.

It's not surprising that the PD completely misplayed this story. After all, your average high school newspaper editor usually exercises better news judgment. But enough is enough when it comes to the PD. This is a story worthy of 60 point type across the front page: **Browns Considering Porter, Get Your Tickets Now!!!**

As a player, Porter has talent that would be useful on this defense. But that is so much beside the point. The possibility of the Browns having both Porter and Kellen Winslow, Jr. on their roster at the same time is so compelling, many fans would likely pay just to watch the practices.

As Browns fans no doubt recall, Porter very publicly called out, or outed, in Porter's view, Winslow last December following another Pittsburgh beat down of Cleveland. It was late in the December 7th game at Heinz Field and Derek Anderson had just completed a short pass to Reuben Droughns. Well after the whistle blew, Winslow blindsided linebacker James Farrior and drew a 15-yard penalty for unnecessary roughness. The hit was ridiculous by any measure of player etiquette and was particularly ridiculous in the context of this completely meaningless game. It was just another bad decision by a player whose career thus far has been defined by bad decisions.

Ultimately, that drive resulted in a Browns touchdown (their only touchdown of the game) but the hit incurred the wrath of nearly every Steeler, none more so than Porter. After the game Porter didn't mince words, saying "It was late, that's what fags do. He's [Winslow] soft. He wants to be tough but he's really soft."

Winslow was fined $5,000 for the late hit but Porter was fined twice that for his comments. League spokesman Steve Alic claimed the fine was the result of Porter's "vulgar, inexcusable statements" to Winslow, presumably the reference to Winslow as a "fag" rather than "soft." But of course the statements weren't made to Winslow they were made to the media. What Alic's statement left unanswered was whether the league would have levied the fine if, for example, Porter had simply referred to the hit as something a "homosexual" would have done. Presumably the more politically correct reference wouldn't have been deemed vulgar. On the other hand it would have played into the stereotype that all homosexuals are soft so it might still

have invoked the wrath of the league.

But whatever the actual reason for the fine, at least as amusing was watching high-minded sportswriters and commentators getting all twisted up in their shorts the same way they did when Ozzie Guillen essentially directed the same remark toward Jay Mariotti of the Chicago Sun-Times after Mariotti was critical of various coaching moves made by Guillen. That's the real arc of these things. Something stupid is said. The offender apologizes. Commentators pile on as if they can't believe anyone would use such terms, even though many of those same writers probably use such and similar terms regularly in casual conversation.

But back to Porter. Even more amusing than all of that was the fact that Porter hardly backed away. Sure, he issued the obligatory apology, saying "I would just like to say it was a poor choice of words in the comment I made toward Winslow. If I offended anybody, I apologize for that." But when he got beyond the public relations speak, he added, "Like I said, I apologize to anybody I offended on it. I didn't mean to offend nobody but Kellen Winslow. Pretty much, that's it about that."

If this sounds familiar, it should. It's really the apology Guillen gave to ESPN : "…"I shouldn't have mentioned the name that was mentioned, but I'm not going to back off of Jay." In other words, both wanted everyone to know that they didn't mean to offend generally only specifically.

Though Porter said he was sorry for the way the comment came out, he at least explained where it came from. Buried in the apology was this nugget: "I guess how we used that word freely, me growing up using it, I didn't think nothing of it like that," Porter said. If this sounds familiar it should. It's essentially the tact that Tim Hardaway used during his third apology for telling the world that he "hates" gay people. Hardaway said: "I am sorry for saying I hate gay people… When I was growing up and now, we say we hate broccoli, we say we hate potato chips, we hate. It's just a form of how we talk…." To that, Browns fans could add "we hate the Pittsburgh Steelers."

Maybe this is a form of how we all talk and how we all apologize. But if Porter does join the Browns, the apology story is likely to get a real workout. Porter's comments to Winslow were hardly his first outburst. And that's the baggage he carries. Given this can the Browns, even

with a huge talent deficit, afford to sign Porter? True, having him on the roster will make for a very interesting training table if not locker room. And true, it is unlikely Porter will ever feel comfortable turning his back on Winslow in the shower stall. But given the relationship between Porter and Winslow and the entertainment value that their pairing would likely provide to an entertainment-starved fan base, the real question here is: Can the Browns afford not to sign Porter?