With the heavy lifting likely done in free agency for the Browns, Mansfield Lucas checks in with the first installment of a multi-part piece that addresses what the team has done to improve the team so far, where they now stand, and what may be coming in the draft. Mansfield addresses the signings of Steinbach, Fraley, McKinney, Wright, Peek, Jamal Lewis, and the two Smith's on the defensive line ... as well as free agency in general in this excellent status report on the team and what they've done.

I'm watching the off-season, and much like the legendary Erik B. and Rakim, I'm thinkin' bout the master plan. Taking stock, Phil needed to address several areas this off season:

~Improve the offensive line with a near reconstruction

~Replace Gary Baxter at one corner

~Improve the defensive line, especially from a run stopping perspective

~Evaluate the QB situation

So what's he done, where we at, what's new, what's happenin'?

The re-signing of Hank "Ace" Fraley before free agency started was a positive step, tantamount to signing a free agent. Ace isn't the most physical center, and I wouldn't consider him a long-term solution, but he gives Phil time to evaluate LeCharles Bentley's rehab, and draft and groom a kid if LeChuck is LeFuc ... well you know. You'd have to be dumber than Rich Passan to pass up this gift horse. You'd have to be dumb enough to pay to read him. Solid single by Phil.

Not seeing any stud tackles on the market, Phil put a hard target on signing a legitimate pro bowl-quality offensive guard. This was manna from heaven to those of us who have been saying since Tre Johnson's knee never responded, "it's the guards, stupid." As we know, Phil hit a home run when he landed Eric Steinbach, the best of the bunch. Derrick Dockery and Fat Lenny Davis aren't in his strata and Kris Dielman, as it turns out, had the good sense to not want to leave the city with the best weather in the nation. The benefits of signing Steinbach cascade. This is a guy who is just coming into his own and his best years are yet to come. He

has the flexibility to play every position on the line in case of injury. But what I haven't seen mentioned much is that he opens up running game possibilities that weren't previously there. Big Eric can m-o-v-e. If the Browns want to expand their OL and running game to more than just a base scheme, they finally have a player to get out into space. If they pair Steinbach with a legitimate right guard who isn't slow afoot, you might see a sweep or trap actually work.

Following the Steinbach signing, Phil found himself in a new kind of free agency market. Every once in a while things change in the NFL before your eyes. Most fans aren't aware of sea change as it is happens, usually recognizing it only in 20/20 hindsight. This is one of those couple year periods, where much like 1993, and 1997-1998, that we'll look back on and see how radical the departure was.

The colective bargaining agreement and resulting revenues have been increasing the salary cap limit for teams at a fairly accelerated rate. The market now finds itself in the buyers' hands, as most teams have $10, $20 or even $30 million dollars over the cap to spend on keeping their own players or signing new players. As teams' continue to get better and more savvy at holding onto their own players until they spill into the "over 30 years old" bracket, fewer starting quality players hit the open market. The supply and demand curve lines are heading in opposite directions like crystal meth in Appalachia since Ohio banned over the counter Sudafed ™. Cats who are role players and spot starters are suddenly pursued like they are Pamela Anderson and there are 32 Borat's with millions of dollars to blow. It is nuts. Guys like Rod Hood and Fat Lenny sign for big money. A very good, but hardly great, cornerback becomes the highest paid defensive player in NFL history. I mean, you go homie Nate, but for real? I believe that for quite a few players you'll see free agency drag out past the draft so that the teams who still have unfilled holes will become desperate and throw obscene amounts at spot starters.

Phil has remained active in this market, particularly with linemen. You read the reports of a dizzying array of visitors and who has been rumored to be in Berea and it is a long list. However, as I write this, the additions include Antwan Peek and Kenny Wright. Uhhhhhhh ... about all Antwan Peek does is supply the answer to the question that fans who discuss Phil's draft success of lack thereof toss about: "How do we know when McMillan and Speegle are officially busts?" Answer? When we sign guys like Antwan Peek. OK, I know he played for Grantham and he had 5 sacks in one season, but 5 sacks is only a career year if you are Courtney Brown. Just sayin'. Peek may have some third down rush potential, but the "hidden gem of free agency" hype sounds like annual off season fan over-optimism. Hopefully he has a burst off the corner on third down. Dancin' Kenny Clean Wright answers another important question, "Is there a DB beaten as often as Ralph Brown and Daven Holly in the NFC?" Sure was. We signed him. He's a push for Daylon McCutcheon in the eyes of Phil. Hopefully. If he's viewed as a starter in a competition with the aforementioned trio and DeMario Minter, aye Chihuahua. Carson Palmer may drop 1,000 yards on the Browns next year.

But hey, I'm not really critical of these moderately priced veteran pick-ups on one condition: that these two are seen only as depth and not as starters. The Browns had serious depth issues when injuries hit, and the whiffs on McMillan, Speegle, and Perkins in 2005 necessitated these signings. So long as these guys aren't seriously penciled into start and depended upon, kudos to Phil for manning up and recognizing that his 2005 draft was Clark-tacular. His 2006 effort was

much better on paper, and let's hold out hope for his April.

It should also be noted that Phil has Shaun Smith, a rotational quality nose guard, signed to a restricted free agent offer sheet. As of this date we don't know if the Bengals will match the offer or not, but rumors abound they are capped out and Shaun will be Big Ted's understudy by Saturday morning. Good signing. The depth was certainly needed.

By far, the most intriguing signing is that of former Browns' slayer Jamal Lewis. In a move that is at best bitter-sweet for core Browns' fans who watched JaLew humiliate the Browns for the all time rushing record while they "fought their guts out" and loath the RatBirds long and undistinguished history of thuggery, JaLew comes to Cleveland on what seems to be the back nine of his career. Coming into free agency, I don't think anyone saw a running back singing coming, and certainly not Lewis. The conventional wisdom is he's an upgrade over Reuben Droughns as he's just a little younger, bigger, stronger, and faster, but he's not the same guy as when he was the former offensive player of the year. Still, you have a former superstar signed to a one-year deal while he's still young enough to break the bank if he has a killer season. As has been noted on the The Cleveland Fan's Browns' board, this is a Mark Shapiro signing. There appears to be no down side from what Droughns was capable of at his best, a huge potential upside if JaLew gets his decisiveness back, and the deal is short enough to not make those hoping for Adrian Peterson despair.

Since I first drafted this piece, Phil has stayed busy. In the last 24 hours he's inked two more players in high need areas, Seth McKinney and Robaire Smith. McKinney is a one-year experiment, another Mark Shapiro bullpen deal, and we'll see if he can make the transition from guard to center and play after having his injured vertebrae that had him on IR last year. The exciting things about McKinney include his age – he's only a 5th year player, his first-day draft pedigree, and his size as he's well over 300 pounds. If McKinney can play at RG, he's a very valuable addition. At worst, if he's healthy, he's the interior depth that Bob Hallen was supposed to represent.

The most recent signing, Robaire Smith, is arguably the second most important signing and poses many questions, such as: when are we just going to DRAFT guys like Robaire and Steinbach, as I recall reading dozens of fans plead the organization to do real-time when we selected bums? How tough will a D Line comprised or guys named Robaire, Orpheus, and Ted prove to be? It sounds more like the junior crew team at Phillips Andover Academy. And lastly, will The Smiths, Shaun and Robaire, deliver us from having to again hear that hit song played over and over last season, Defensive Line in a Coma (I believe it's getting serious) ?

Realistically speaking, given how mediocre the market is and potential choices to be made, Phil has exercised both appropriate willingness to make the signing he had to have happen, happen, and the intelligence to beg out of the Nate Clements situation when it got crazy. In between he's added the kind of veteran depth that helps cover up devastating mismatches when the inevitable injuries pile up, and he's taken a flier of opportunity on two low risk, high reward players, and solidified the D Line.

The way the market is positioned, Phil is off to a really good start this off-season.

Let’s just hope Eric makes it two plays into training camp.

Next installment of Opie’s Opus: Where do these signings leave the Browns?