Well, the Browns 2007 schedule is out, and the team has been dealt a tough early season slate of games by the NFL powers that be. Four of the Browns first five games are against Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Baltimore, and New England ... and Erik Cassano thinks that's a pretty tough hand to be dealt to a team coming off of a four win season.

In an earlier column , I asked everyone to take it easy on the baseball schedule-makers, who have a Herculean task to compile a 162-game schedule for 30 different teams while taking into consideration weighted divisional play, interleague play, travel logistics and other factors.

But then there are the NFL's schedule-makers, who displayed their handiwork on Wednesday with the unveiling of the 2007 league schedule.

As I glanced at the first five weeks of the Browns schedule, which forces them to burn all three divisional home dates before the calendar flips to October, then forces them to play the Patriots to lead off October, I have to wonder exactly what kind of reputation the NFL's schedule scribes have among their baseball, NBA and NHL counterparts.

Are these the guys the National Lacrosse League didn't want? Did these guys get fired from the Canadian Football League front office when they accidentally scheduled the Montreal Alouettes to play back-to-back cross-country roadies against British Columbia and Edmonton?

Seriously: Thirty-two teams. Sixteen games. One bye week. Six divisional games and four opposite-conference games per team. It's not super-easy, but when you consider what other sports have to go through to put together a season, it seems kind of like paint-by-number scheduling.

And this is the best they can come up with for the Browns? Home games against Pittsburgh and Cincinnati to start the season, a West Coast trip to Oakland in Week 3, back home to face the Ravens in Week 4, then on to Massachusetts to face the Patriots in Week 5?

Not only does it mean the Browns face three road divisional games from Nov. 11 on, if Romeo Crennel's 1-11 divisional record as Browns head coach is any indication, it means the Browns have an extremely good chance of having at least four losses in their first five games.

Regardless of the impact of this year's free agent and draft classes, regardless of whether Kellen Winslow Jr. is healthy enough to play by September, nobody in their right mind thinks the Browns are going to be improved enough to win consistently in the AFC's toughest division next year. To ask the Browns to play each divisional opponent one time before the leaves even start turning is cruel and unusual punishment.

If Crennel is truly skating on thin ice with the front office, this early-season gauntlet might ensure that he is out the door before the first Autumn frost, paving the way for interim coach Rob Chudzinski or interim coach Todd Grantham, and another runaway late-season freight train.

The Browns are not a very confident organization right now. The slightest bit of adversity causes their fragile collective ego to tip over and smash into a million pieces. To ask them to face the brutal Steeler defense and high-powered Bengal offense right out of the gate with no respite is akin to taking a sledgehammer to their psyche and just getting the carnage over with.

The fragile-ego thing is the Browns' fault. The schedule makers shouldn't go out of their way to coddle them. But for a team that spends most of its time trying to get it bearings, let alone be competitive or win, to throw them to the divisional wolves so soon like this, with a West Coast intermission and Bill Belichick chaser, seems rather excessive.

If the Browns start the season 0-5 or 1-4, they aren't going to recover to go 8-8 like some teams can. If they start the season 0-5, they are on the fast track to 2-14, regardless of how light or heavy the rest of the schedule is. Once they're down, they're out.

Apparently, that was lost on the NFL's schedule gurus, who just put the Browns and their head coach behind the eight-ball from Day One. Keep the libations and antacid handy if you plan on watching the Browns in September. It appears you'll need them.