Over the course of the the last couple decades, the NFL Draft has transformed from an administrative activity to an event. Two days of TV coverage. Months of analysis. Huge parties at Panini's downtown. Endless columns on websites like this one. In Gary Benz's latest, he talks about the circus the draft, and the "smokescreen season" leading into it has become.

You may not ever be able to pin the exact time and place when the NFL Draft went from an administrative activity to an event, but a good starting point probably is the birth of Mel Kiper, Jr. The annual dog-and-pony show or meat market, depending on your preference, is now so big that it spans two days, is held at Radio City Music Hall in New York City and has spawned, thanks to the aforementioned Kiper, an entire industry whose sole purpose is to convince fans that they too can be a NFL general manager.

So it's no surprise, of course, that the local media would be lock step with this approach. And this comment isn't confined to the mainstream media, either. Any and every Cleveland sports web site/blog, including the Clevelandfan.com where I'm a frequent contributor, treats the draft like a presidential election. We write countless stories and columns (like this one), conduct mock draft after mock draft and ultimately become convinced that if the Browns don't draft X in the first round, we are in for 10 more seasons of ineptitude.

Well, the latter comment may be true given the ineptitude of the Browns since their return, but that's another point for another day. For today, it is enough to marvel at the column inches devoted to Browns GM Phil Savage's pre-draft press conference held on Tuesday.

This press conference was covered by everyone in the mainstream media. Despite the

number of stories written about it, the essence of the conference can be distilled to one word: nothing. That's nothing as in there was nothing that was said, there were no clues offered, nor did anyone leave with any better idea of what the Browns might do in the draft then they had before the conference started.

The real issue is why this is news at all. Did any reporter walk into that conference room thinking Savage might actually say, "Ok, people, listen up. Here's our draft plans. We have the third pick. We were just on the phone with Mike Lombardi over in Oakland. He tells me that they are definitely taking Jamarcus Russell. Matt Millen over in Detroit says that he's taking Calvin Johnson with the second pick. He said he figured that he may have screwed up picking other receivers, but Johnson is simply can't miss. That means that we will have our choice of three really good players: Adrian Peterson, Brady Quinn and Joe Thomas. Right now, we're leaning toward Adrian Peterson. That could change and if it does, I'll let you know, but right now that's our choice. Any questions?"

Of course not. But we and the rest of the fans and the league listen and re-listen to what Savage said looking for even the slightest clue into his thinking. While Savage offered no real insight into who the Browns might pick, he did use his platform to accomplish his real purpose: try to influence who other teams might select. This cloak and dagger stuff played by NFL general managers is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the draft. Given the way the league is structured, draft choices are the crown jewels. Though the teams kvetch and moan about what they will actually have to pay the players once drafted, there is no question that they have all long since concluded that the key to a team's sustained success is drafting well, year after year.

So the GMs do what they can to throw each other off the trail. If you didn't think so, read between the lines not only of what Savage said Tuesday but what everyone else is saying. The reason, for example, that in one fashion or another a player's stock tends to drop or rise around draft time has nothing to do with how that player performed at the combine or in private work outs. It has everything to do with teams' general managers and other staff members purposely putting out misinformation in order to better the chances either that the same player they just trashed might fall to them in the draft or some other player they covet more will be available.

Savage is no different if you consider his comments Tuesday on the "Big 5" of the draft. There

was hardly a ringing endorsement for any of them, save for Calvin Johnson. And, in many ways, the comments Savage made were just the parroting of what others have been saying for the last few weeks. Regarding Jamarcus Russell, for example, the comments were almost laughable. He said, in part, “I don’t have any questions about Jamarcus’ work ethic. I know it’s been a concern in terms of his weight.” The question is to whom, exactly has it been a concern? It certainly wasn’t to his former team, the LSU Tigers, whom he led with such aplomb that it made him one of the top players in the upcoming draft. In reality, it’s a concern only to those teams below Oakland who would like nothing more than to see Russell drop down to them. And in repeating this alleged concern, Savage became a participant in the scam hoping, apparently, that he at least has the chance to draft a player he clearly likes.

Savage’s comments regarding Adrian Peterson were similar. Despite an objectively impressive resume, many with a vested interest in having Peterson’s draft status lowered have been doing more than whispering that Peterson’s supposed upright running style could hurt him in the NFL. Savage said “he is a player who has somewhat of an upright style... The thing with Adrian, he's a home run hitter. He's going to have some runs of 0, 1, 2 yards and the next one might be 55 yards. He's definitely a guy who swings for the fences….I do think he's going to have to refine his style to a degree, to be a wiser runner. There are times he should just duck down and get out of bounds."

See what Savage did there? Just as with Russell, he sent the message to Cleveland fans that this is a top prospect while simultaneously telling them that he’s flawed so that the fans won’t be so disappointed if they don’t draft him and also telling the other teams listening in that the Browns aren’t in love with this guy anyway.

But lest anyone think that this game is only played on the downside, it’s not. Savage and his ilk also use it as a way of talking up players that they’d like off the board by the time they get to them so that they can draft who they really want without being criticized by the fans for not drafting the initial player. Calvin Johnson is this year’s poster boy for that approach.

Nothing about Johnson has changed since the season ended. He didn’t get bigger. He didn’t get faster. His hands are the same. Suddenly, or perhaps not so suddenly, you have folks like Savage talking up Johnson as the number one pick in the draft. At Tuesday’s press conference, Savage said of Johnson, “he’s a rare, rare physical prospect. There aren’t many of

these walking around. People say why on Earth would the Browns take a wideout? The reason is that he affects coverage, too, and probably makes your running game better. This guy is a big-time talent. It wouldn't surprise me to see him go No. 1." In saying this, Savage just repeated a mantra that most fans who couldn't pick Johnson out of a lineup are now saying.

These comments were not directed at the fans. They were instead designed primarily for the Detroit Lions and Oakland Raiders in general and Matt Millen and Mike Lombardi (or whoever is making draft decisions for Oakland these days) in particular. If Millen takes Johnson, then it's just a question of who Oakland takes. If, as assumed, Oakland takes Russell, that will leave Savage with a choice of one of the top two quarterback prospects, or the top running back or the top lineman. And since he also just trashed Russell, he's hoping that increased the chances that Russell will fall to him and the Browns.

But irrespective of whether it's Oakland or Detroit that takes a quarterback, Savage wins in his scenario if he can get either of them (or another team who overpays to trade up) to take Johnson. Whether fans would agree or not, it's at least clear that Savage would rather make his choice with Johnson already off the board. If that doesn't happen, then Savage is faced with the possibility of also ignoring someone he just said could easily be the number one pick in the draft.

What really should not get lost in all this shuffle is that while the first pick generates all the noise, the issues with the Browns go significantly deeper. They are more than just one player away, to be charitable. Certainly the right pick in the third slot is critical to filling some of the team's many needs, but it's not the only answer. Instead, the real test of this or any other draft is what Savage does with the rest of his picks. This, more so than the first pick is likely to tell us more about how soon we can expect this team to become a factor in its division, let alone in the league, than anything else.

The smoke and mirrors, the deceptions, the red herrings that go up at this time of year make for great fun but are mostly irrelevant. Savage's job hangs in the balance not on whether he picks Quinn or Russell or Johnson or Thomas but whether he can find other gems in the later rounds.