Gary Benz believes yesterday was a defining moment for a football team in serious need of one. Not only did Phil Savage address the offensive line in a big way, but he also made bold moves to acquire a franchise quarterback and a potential shut down cornerback. But above all this, it was Savage who suddenly became the face and voice of a franchise so desperate for a face and a voice.

There is a pulse in Berea after all.

Fans in Oakland or Detroit or wherever may be celebrating the picks of their respective franchises, but Cleveland fans are celebrating so much more, the return of a once proud franchise. And for that, they can thank a previously mild-mannered little heard from general manager out of Mobile, Alabama, Phil Savage.

This is really the reason fans in Cleveland today are celebrating, even if they don't quite know that yet. The events as they unfolded during yesterday's NFL draft were remarkable in so many ways that Browns fans heads are still spinning and for once in the right direction. First, Savage resisted the opportunity to take one of the most marquee players to enter the draft in a long time in favor of a guy who spent the day fishing. Even fans clamoring for the Browns to draft Wisconsin tackle Joe Thomas had to be amazed that it really happened, if only because they have become so used to the Browns (and any Cleveland sports team for that matter) doing the exact wrong thing. But just this once the Browns finally decided to address the most consistently worst offensive line in football organically by spending third-pick money on one of the least glamorous but most important jobs in football: left offensive tackle.

Second, presented with another opportunity to draft that marquee player, Savage didn't flinch, getting Notre Dame quarterback Brady Quinn with the 22nd pick in the draft. The events that had to conspire to allow the Browns to seize that opportunity remain the top story line, not just in Cleveland but throughout the NFL. Naturally, it had a Cleveland connection as it was Miami's drafting of Ohio State via Glenville wide receiver Ted Ginn, Jr. that allowed Quinn to slip all the way down to the 22nd pick. It cost Savage and the Browns a steep price, next year's number one pick. But desperate times call for bold measures and sacrificing a number one pick for Quinn seems the much better and obvious play than, say, sacrificing a number one pick to draft Kyle Boller, which Baltimore did with Savage in tow in 2003.

But above all this, it was Savage who suddenly became the face and voice of a franchise so desperate for a face and a voice. Owner Randy Lerner rarely talks to the press and when he does it's usually to say that he has nothing to do with the football operations. Head Coach Romeo Crennel has conducted any number of press conferences and interviews, but has the media presence of a television test pattern. Most shut him off immediately and those that do sit and stare do so more out of habit than interest. But when Savage left the podium in Berea yesterday after explaining what will forever be his signature move here in Cleveland, the feeling was palpable that if a transformation had not just taken place, it at least was started.

And whatever happens with Thomas, Quinn, and CB Eric Wright from UNLV, and whoever else the Browns get on Day 2 of the draft, the emergence of Savage will be the real story of this draft for Cleveland fans for years to come. Savage spoke passionately and eloquently about what a watershed day it was yesterday, saying, "This is a day that will go down as the day that the fortunes of the Browns turned. This is going to be one of those stepping-stone days."

But it was what Savage said next which, while sounding like a defense of JaMarcus Russell, a player who hails from Savage's home town and who Savage knows well, was really an insight into the soul of Savage himself. Taking the press conference into a seemingly completely different direction, Savage said "for me to see (Russell) bashed like he was for the last two and half months -- it's terrible. He emerged from that because he's that talented. To

see what he had to go through and not be able to say a word about it, I will come to his defense today and say I think he's going to be fantastic in this league. I don't think it's right the way this process is set up. He's truly a franchise quarterback and he's going to do great."

It seemed a little odd, initially, that Savage would use yesterday's press conference as a bit of a bully pulpit in order to defend Russell and criticize the draft process that dwells more on negatives than positives as draft day approaches, but in the end it really said more about Savage. There was absolutely no economic incentive or advantage for Savage to talk up Russell yesterday. Certainly the Oakland Raiders general partner Al Davis wasn't looking for and didn't need validation from Savage or anyone else. But by coming to defense of Russell, Savage demonstrated a kind of character and courage that enabled him to make the decisions he made yesterday, even at the risk of his own professional life.

For now and for years to come, Savage's trade with Dallas of next year's number one pick to get Quinn will be scrutinized. And it will only get worse following next year's draft when Dallas, or whoever they eventually trade the pick to, actually makes its selection with that pick. The careers of Quinn and Player X will be forever linked, much in the same way that Quinn and Ginn will be forever linked in the minds of Miami fans. For a kid like Ginn, who brought so much joy to Buckeye fans with his amazing speed and brilliant return ability, one can only hope that the pressure that he will feel from Dolphins fans almost universally disappointed in selection won't define his existence in Miami. For Quinn, though, he suffers under no such pressure because the Browns addressed the wishes of fans split between Thomas and Quinn by getting them both.

But as to Savage, whatever pressure he was feeling, one thing is for sure, he wasn't paralyzed by it. The defense of Russell and his willingness to stick his neck out at least as far as any Cleveland sports executive has in a very long time by forcing a dramatic change in the status quo in Berea is what likely will ultimately enamor Savage to Browns fans. In still a last bit of passion that he held in reserve after speaking about Russell, Savage was almost defiant in staring down the Gods who lord over Cleveland sports and ensure that any good fortune will immediately be followed by 7 years of bad luck, saying "it's just ridiculous. I'm sick of it. We actually have a chance to do something. We're going to do it. Just give us a chance."

On other days and for other team officials, that would be a bold request. But given what Savage has accomplished, which, if nothing else, brought him and the Browns instant

credibility, it didn’t seem like too much to ask .