'Tis the season to be optimistic if you're a Browns fan. Every February, we laud the teams free agent signings. Every year in late April, we praise the Browns draft picks. Only to be disappointed come fall. We are Charlie Brown, thinking this is the time Lucy won't pull the football away. But in his latest, Erik Cassano says this year feels a little different.

No one needs to tell fans of the Cleveland Browns how to hope.

Hope is that eternally-springing thing that appears every April when the team makes their draft picks and slowly builds throughout the summer. Hope is that feeling you get, no matter the team's recent track record, no matter the wannabe-cynical defense mechanisms you've erected to save yourself from further disappointment, that this year will be different, that this draft and free-agent class will be the desperately-needed cavalry that is going to turn the tide.

Hope caused Browns fans to believe in Kelly Holcomb as a starting quarterback. In brittle Lee Suggs
as a feature
running
back. In Gerard Warren as the next Warren
Sapp
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From the high-profile (Tim Couch, Courtney Brown, William Green) to the sleepers (Charlie Frye, Luke McCown) to the where-on-Earth-did-they-find-this-guy (Ben Gay), numerous players have been the the subject of hope these past eight years. None of them rewarded the hope, at least long-term.

Yet every April it starts again. Kellen Winslow. Braylon Edwards. The drafts are widely-accepted, never harshly-criticized by the fans because we want to believe our team is doing the right thing, finally. But the losing seasons just keep on coming.

You'd be excused if you wanted to buck the hope trend, cross your arms and go into full "Prove it" mode the past couple of years. With their track record, the Browns deserve nothing more.

That's what makes the events that affected the Browns on Saturday so difficult from an emotional-investment standpoint. As a fan of a team that has so consistently failed you since

1995, you'd have every right in the world to assume that Browns blew their third overall pick on an overrated offensive tackle in Joe Thomas, then gave up way too much to Dallas to move back into the first round and select an overrated quarterback in Brady Quinn.

You'd have every right to have a several-second flashback to the 1989 Herschel Walker trade, in which the Vikings essentially started the Cowboys' 1990s dynasty by trading a boatload of draft picks to Dallas for Walker.

You'd have every right to believe the Dolphins made the correct choice when they passed over Quinn in favor of Ted Ginn Jr. at pick No. 9.

You'd have every right to believe this is all going to end badly for the Browns, as things always seem to do. No one could fault you. History is on your side.

So why does this draft feel different? It goes beyond the cautious optimism that surrounds every draft to a feeling of real change. It's undeniable, no matter how hard you try to chalk it up to hype.

The Earth moved under Cleveland Saturday afternoon, and it had nothing to do with fault lines. It really wasn't even about Thomas or Quinn. They were the end products.

Saturday was the day that Phil Savage stopped behaving like Dwight Clark and Butch Davis before him. Saturday was the day that a long line of Browns GMs-as-self-proclaimed-master-craftsmen stopped. Saturday, Savage tossed aside the step-by-step master plan and started trying to win out of necessity.

Every GM attempting to rebuild a team seems to have a plan. A three-year plan, a five-year plan. It helps him look organized. It helps draw confidence from team ownership. But rarely does the plan follow the script start to finish. In the Browns' case, it rarely gets past "start" before there are problems.

Maybe it was the LeCharles Bentley injury a year ago. Maybe it was the rash of staph infections in Berea. Maybe it was watching Gary Baxter's career likely end before his very eyes. But somewhere along the line, Savage realized that time is an NFL GM's greatest opponent.

ESPN analyst Mark May chided the high price the Browns paid to acquire Dallas' 22nd overall pick and draft Quinn. He said the Browns were gambling with their future in trading away their first-round pick next year.

True. But the Browns have had nothing but "future" since re-entering the league. Sooner or later, that future has to become the present, or the guys who decide the team's future won't be making the decisions anymore.

Saturday, Savage made two bold moves in acquiring Thomas and trading for the right to draft Quinn. Not because he wants to be known as a GM who makes bold moves, but because bold

moves are the only way he is going to ensure he and head coach Romeo Crennel keep their jobs.

The Browns have to show rapid, significant improvement starting with the outset of training camp in late July. Tough schedule be damned, injuries be damned, *staphylococcus aureus* be damned. There are no excuses that can cascade from the GM's chair that will take root with a fan base -- and more importantly, an owner -- desperate for wins.

Savage, smart cookie that he is, quickly realized that. Instead of trying to egotistically re-invent a bigger, better wheel, he's trying to find the best talent he can at key positions and get a winning team on the field as soon as possible. Which is a GM's job in the end.

That, by itself, is the reason why there is something beyond hope in Cleveland today.