It's early July, the Indians are fighting it out for first place in the American League Central and so, naturally, all anyone can talk about is whether Brady Quinn will be signed before training camp begins in a few weeks. A holdout is starting to appear imminent, but Gary Benz tells Browns fans not to worry.

It's early July, the Indians are fighting it out for first place in the American League Central and so, naturally, all anyone can talk about is whether Brady Quinn will be signed before training camp begins in a few weeks.

Let's start with the basics: a few notable exceptions aside, there is no question that Quinn will sign. They always do. Not signing is nearly always disastrous for a player's career. Consider the examples that most Cleveland fans can remember: Tom Skladany, Tom Cousineau and Danny Ferry. While none of these players would likely admit it to this day, not signing with their teams essentially robbed each of them of some prime years of their careers, ultimately to their detriment and that of their teams.

In the case of Skladany, he was a second round pick of the Browns in 1977. If that seems like a reach, in retrospect it clearly was. Some things never change

with the Browns. In any event, Skladany was a three-time All American punter with Ohio State, so there was a basis for such a high draft status. But despite his impressive college credentials, in the end he was still a punter. The difference between a good and a great one is not all that noticeable and while a key role on any team, it is one of the more easily replaceable jobs.

Nonetheless, Skladany, on the advice of one of the worst agents ever, Howard Slusher, held out. And held out. And held out. Slusher was notorious in the 1970s for advising clients to holdout for the last dollar, a strategy that had proven successful in some respects for Slusher, although not necessarily for his clients. In this instance, though, the Browns never blinked to Slusher's outrageous demands and Skladany sat out the season. A punter, sitting out the season. Never happened before Skladany and hasn't happened since. The Browns eventually gave up on him and Skladany eventually signed with the Detroit Lions after missing an entire season, much to their disappointment.

It's hard to say how missing a year of football hurt Skladany or whether his lackluster career resulted from the reputation he gained by holding out in the first place, but either way, he hardly lived up to his college accomplishments. Although punting and place kicking are the least physically demanding positions in the NFL with even mediocre players having lengthy careers, Skladany last only six seasons, which is kind of hard to fathom given his college resume. For a simple comparison, consider that former Browns punter, Bryan Wagner, lasted eight NFL seasons, albeit with five different teams, but he wasn't even drafted, let alone drafted in the second round.

If Skladany's was the unfortunate collision of an egomaniacal and incompetent agent and a player who was delusional about his own talent, Cousineau and Ferry were different stories altogether. More so than Skladany, each was clearly the real deal coming out of college. Their long list of accomplishments coming out of college are beyond dispute. Yet neither accomplished all that much on the pro level and it's fair to suggest that their inability to reach a contract at the outset

and the decisions that followed were partially responsible.

Cousineau, for example, was the number one pick in the 1979 draft after an incredible career with the Buckeyes. He was all-everything with the Buckeyes and, to this day still, one of the greatest players in Buckeye history. While it's not unusual for players, particularly the number one draft pick, to hold out for big dollars, the only real leverage most have is withholding their services and allowing fan pressure to build. Canadian football isn't much of an option. It's football but it's hardly the NFL. Those who play in Canada do so mainly because they aren't good enough to play in the NFL. They are usually too slow or too small. Often they are both. It's like the difference between the Big Ten and the Ohio Athletic Conference. For someone who is considered a pro prospect, particularly the top pro prospect like Cousineau was, it's simply not a consideration.

Yet, for all that, Cousineau constantly played the Canadian football card in his negotiations with Buffalo, except he wasn't bluffing. When the Montreal Alouettes offered him more money, most likely in an effort to raise the profile of the league, Cousineau took it and played three seasons in Canada, where he was a star, relatively speaking.

In 1982, Cousineau wanted to return to the NFL. The Bills still held his rights under the arcane rules of the NFL and when Cousineau reached a free agent deal with the Houston Oilers, the Bills matched it, almost out of spite. But due to the great relationship between Bills owner Ralph Wilson and Browns owner Art Modell, a deal was struck between the clubs, a deal that ultimately was a disaster for the Browns. Cleveland sent its 1983 first round pick, the 14th overall, to Buffalo. Of course, that picked turned into Hall of Famer, Jim Kelly. Cousineau, meanwhile, was solid, if unspectacular in his five seasons with the Browns. Although he was All-NFL twice, he never made it to the pro bowl, perhaps because he was never really a part of the NFL fraternity. He went on to play two more seasons, with the San Francisco 49ers and retired in 1987.

Ferry's story is very similar. Like Cousineau, Ferry was one of the greatest college players in his day and is still one of the greatest players in Duke history. As a senior, he won the Naismith award, the Oscar Robertson award and was the UPI national player of the year. He still ranks among the all-time leaders for Duke in a variety of statistics, which is all the more impressive because it is Duke.

Like both Cousineau and Skladany, Ferry was the recipient of some bad advice. He was the second pick in the 1989 draft but he refused to play with the Clippers. When he couldn't engineer a trade to a more favorable team, he signed with Il Messaggaro of the Italian league. While he may have enjoyed the atmosphere and the food, he lost a valuable season of experience by instead playing with inferior talent.

Of course, Ferry's intransigence with L.A. came back to bite Cleveland. After Ferry signed with Il Messaggaro, the Clippers traded his rights to the Cavs in exchange for Ron Harper and two first-round picks. Harper was just coming into the prime of his career but Cavs GM Wayne Embry was nervous about Harper's off-court associates and decided to part ways. Compounding the problem, Embry also signed Ferry to a 10-year contract which proved to be an anchor around the franchise when Ferry underperformed.

As with Cousineau, it's hard to know how much Ferry's time away from playing at the highest level hurt his game. Perhaps Ferry was never destined to become a star in the league anyway, mainly because his lack of quickness made him a liability defensively. But had Ferry

played that season with the Clippers, he likely would have never landed in Cleveland and the trade of Harper may not have happened. It might not have made any difference with the Clippers, nothing does, but it certainly altered the face of the Cleveland franchise.

Which brings us full circle back to Brady Quinn. It's extremely unlikely that Quinn will ever come close to making the mistakes of Skladany, Cousineau or Ferry. For one thing, he has a well-respected agent in Tom Condon who, while always driving a hard bargain, is hardly a lunatic who would put his client in such a bad position. For another thing, given what happened to Quinn on draft day, he enters the league with a chip on his shoulder and something to prove. Great careers have been made out of less.

While the contract posturing already is now in full swing, if Quinn is in the advice-taking mood, here's a little, unsolicited: study your playbook, work out hard, and don't let your agent fill your head with unrealistic expectations. Whether you were supposed to be one of the top five players drafted isn't nearly as relevant as where you were actually drafted, and that was 22nd. No team, including the Browns, is going to pay the 22nd player in the draft as if he was one of the top players in the draft. Bide your time and get yourself in a position to make your money on your second contract, not your first.

But things being what they are, it's unlikely Quinn is taking that

kind of advice. Consider his words the other day while attending the NFL's rookie symposium in Florida when he stated

"I have complete faith in the Browns in getting this done. I'd think they'd want to get me signed if they want me to compete for the starting job."

Of course the Browns want him to compete for the starting job, but that decision is really Quinn's not the Browns. The Browns already have two quarterbacks ahead of him. The best way for Quinn to earn the job is to be in camp from day one. Even then, his chances of being the starter when the season opens are virtually nil. As between the two, the Browns are much better positioned to withstand a Quinn holdout than the other way around. If Quinn were to holdout for more than a week, the likelihood of him every starting a game this upcoming season drops precipitously each holdout day thereafter. Training camp is simply too valuable, particularly for a skill player.

Whether Quinn understands that or not is hard to say. But the fans needn't worry either way. While we're in the advice-giving mood, here's a little for the fans, again

unsolicited: Relax. Don't be manipulated by the media or Quinn's agent or Quinn or Phil Savage or anyone else. In fact, ignore the contract talks completely. Remember, with Quinn, as with every other draft choice, it's not a question of if he'll sign, only when.