Nick Allburn is back in the fold for us here at The Cleveland Fan, and is one of an array of talented writers we have lined up to help coevr the Browns for us this year. In this piece, Nick expresses his concern over the lack of a contingency plan at running back behind Jamal Lewis, who has been riddled with injuries over the last couple of seasons. Training camp starts one week from Friday, can ya believe it?

I''m as big a Phil Savage supporter as you'll find. That said, doesn''t it seem that under Savage's leadership, the Browns have ignored some very rectifiable preseason problems over the last two summers?

Last summer left fans and media members alike scratching their heads; wondering why the Browns did not so much as feign pursuit of a veteran quarterback to mentor Charlie Frye.

To Savage's credit, Derek Anderson proved capable of filling Frye's shoes. Hell, with his size 17s, Anderson overfilled Frye's shoes. But in all seriousness, one can't help but wonder if a veteran presence would have better prepared Charlie Frye for the rigors, both mental and physical, of starting in the NFL.

Summer of 2007 now has a personnel problem with which it can be likewise linked; the lack of a proven backup behind running back Jamal Lewis.

Lewis is only 27 (he will turn 28 in August), but he experienced nagging pain in his right ankle for the majority of the 2006 campaign, and elected to have surgery on the ankle this offseason. Perhaps more significant is the considerable mileage Lewis has accumulated during his career; 1822 carries in just six years of service

(not counting 2001, when Lewis missed the entire season with a torn ACL). It''s safe to say that Lewis is not the same back who torched the Browns for a single-game record 295 yards back in 2003, on his way to the second-largest season rushing total in league history.

So what's the contingency plan? Phil Savage has decided to stay put with last year's backups, Jerome Harrison and Jason Wright. *Yeah, really.*

Forgive me for being cynical, but is it wise to place so much faith in two runners who have a combined total of only 286 yards rushing?

Free agency doesn't look much better. This late in the game, there simply aren't many accomplished ball carriers available. Here are some leftovers with significant experience; Corey Dillon, Reno Mahe, and James Mungro. Not exactly premier names, with the exception of Dillon, who is far past his prime.

The Browns may have missed out on their best opportunities to field a reliable backup early this year. Shortly after inking Lewis, the Browns dealt Reuben Droughns to the New York Giants. Less than two months later, Cleveland passed on Notre Dame running back Darius Walker in the seventh round of April's draft, instead selecting Arizona wideout Syndric Steptoe. (Obviously, the seemingly limitless marketing possibilities that come with a player named "Syndric Steptoe" were simply too lucrative to pass up).

Although it's far too early to accurately grade this year's draft class, Walker, a fairly accomplished back in college, seemed the far better value in the draft's final round. Droughns would have been an adequate backup, but he was probably making too much money to be retained merely in a reserve role. Plus, Droughns had amassed off-field problems, and after he basically quit on the team late last season, Savage had to illustrate that Droughns' behavior was unacceptable.

Given the limited availability of qualified backups, it's easy to see why Savage believes that the players currently on the roster are superior to any free agents. But where's the risk? Why not bring a few backs in for camp? If they make the team, the Browns have upgraded their reserves. If they don't make the team, Savage doesn't have to give them a dime.

The vast improvements made on the offensive line offer the hope that the Browns may, for the first time since their resurrection, be capable of maintaining a solid, if

unspectacular, running game this season. It would be tragic if such promise was wasted because the Browns took an ill-advised leap of faith on a worn out Jamal Lewis.

Backfields which exclusively feature one runner are not as commonplace as they once were. Teams have realized that in addition to the benefits of keeping backs fresh, it is unrealistic to expect a running back to carry the ball 30 times each game and stay healthy all season long. I hope I'm wrong and Lewis stays healthy all year, but if the eighth year back from Tennessee goes down, particularly if it happens early, the Browns and their fans will be left staring down the barrel of another four or five win finish.

Can't you just picture Jerry Jones, with our 2008 first round pick in hand, licking his chops in his secret underground lair?