In the opinion of The Rhino, only the Boston Celtics have been hit harder by untimely deaths than the Cleveland Browns franchise. Ernie Davis, Tom Bloom, Don Fleming, and Don Rogers all had great promise as players, perished at young ages, and never got a chance to reach their potential as Browns. The Rhino remembers these players in this excellent piece.

There's a new film being made about Ernie Davis, a man whose untimely death has haunted Browns fans for almost 50 years. As I was reading about the film on Davis's life, I was struck by the fact that while he may be the greatest ghost to haunt the Cleveland Browns, he's not the only one.

The Cleveland Browns have other phantoms who live on in the bittersweet memories of longtime fans. Sadly, there are plenty of examples of athletes dying before their time, but with the possible exception of the Boston Celtics, I think you can make a case that no franchise has had its history altered more by untimely deaths than the Cleveland Browns.

That's because a couple of players who died before their careers had a chance to blossom were so good that you really do wonder whether the past 43 years might have looked a lot different, had they only been around long enough to live up to their potential.

Davis's tragic story is well known. While at Syracuse University, he led the team to the 1959 National Championship and became the first African-American to win the Heisman Trophy. Paul Brown fell in love with the idea of having Davis and Jim Brown in the same backfield, and traded All-Pro Bobby Mitchell to the Redskins in order to obtain the rights to Davis. Tragically, Davis died of leukemia before he ever played a down in a Cleveland Browns uniform. Although he never played for the Browns, no Cleveland Brown will ever wear his number 45 again.

Davis is a particularly haunting figure, not just because of his awesome potential, but because of what the Browns gave up for him. As I've contended before , whatever the Browns may have done with Davis, the loss of Bobby Mitchell almost

undoubtedly cost them at least one NFL championship. Nevertheless, Davis is far from the only player whose absence may have helped to cost the Browns a title.

The 1962 off-season was devastating to the Cleveland Browns, so much so that it was included on the team's list of all-time memorable events that was put together for last season's 60th anniversary celebration. On January 18, 1963, Purdue halfback and Cleveland's 6th round pick Tom Bloom was killed in a traffic accident. Davis passed away in May, but what probably hurt the team even more was the loss of a rising star less than one month later. In June 1963, safety Don Fleming, who had been named to The Sporting News All-NFL team for the 1962 season, was electrocuted at a construction site were he was working as part of his off-season job.

The secondary was perhaps the biggest weakness on the Browns' defense in the mid-1960s. Ross Fichtner took over for Fleming in 1963, but it's hard to replace a budding All-Pro with a converted QB, and it showed. Had Fleming lived, he would've been paired at Safety with another All-Pro, Bernie Parrish, and the Browns defense of the mid-1960s would've looked a lot different.

All this talk about the secondary brings me to to the tragedy that undoubtedly had the greatest impact on the Cleveland Browns aside from the untimely deaths of Davis and Fleming. I'm referring to the loss of Safety Don Rogers in June of 1986. Rogers, who died of a drug overdose just days before his wedding in June 1986, was MVP of the 1983 Rose Bowl and the AFC's Defensive Rookie of the Year in 1984. Don Rogers was 6'1" and 210 lbs. of pure fury. The man could flat out hit! He earned his Rose Bowl MVP award in part by knocking Michigan State's QB out of the game with a vicious hit.

What Browns fans wouldn't have given to see Don Rogers patrolling the secondary during The Drive. Third and 18 at the Browns 48 yard line? No chance, Horseface, no chance. "The Drive" goes down in history as "The Concussion."

It's hard to overstate the impact of the loss of Davis (and the related trade of Mitchell), Fleming and Rogers on the Cleveland Browns. Their deaths made an impression on their teams that lasted almost a decade. The Cleveland Browns of the 1960s appeared in championship games during he 1964, 1965, 1968 and

1969 seasons, and had only the 1964 title to show for it. Would Davis or Mitchell and Fleming have made a difference? Almost certainly. The Browns of the 1980s made it to the AFC Championship game three times, and came away empty. Would Don Rogers' presence have made a difference? In at least one of those games, I think the answer is yes.

Aside from the Celtics, who lost two franchise players to untimely deaths less than a decade apart, I can't think of another pro team that you can plausibly argue has been as affected by death as much as the Cleveland Browns. The losses of Davis, Fleming and Rogers were tragedies that impacted lives of those who knew and loved them beyond anything that those who only knew them as fans could imagine. But we still can't help but be haunted by their deaths and by thoughts of how very different things might have been on the gridiron had they had the opportunity to reach their potential.

"For of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these, 'it might have been.'"