Since the Browns returned to the NFL in 1999, they have perpetually had one of the league's poorest offensive lines. Fans are fed up. And so was Phil Savage. He signed the best offensive lineman available in free agency (Eric Steinbach) to a lucratrive contract, and also selected the best offensive lineman in the NFL Draft (Joe Thomas) with the 3rd overall selection. Will it finally translate to a good offensive front? Erik Cassano takes a look at the Browns retooled offensive line.

Synopsis

The story of the 2006 Browns offensive line can be divided into two parts: Before LeCharles
Bentley destroyed his knee and after
LeCharles
Bentley destroyed his knee.

Before Bentley's injury on the first contact drill of training camp, the Browns' offensive line looked like it had turned the corner. The free agency additions of two-time Pro Bowler Bentley and tackle Kevin Shaffer were supposed to stabilize a line that had been characteristically bad with few exceptions since the team returned to the league in 1999.

Then Bentley went down, the center position became a mess that wasn't cleaned up until the Browns traded for Hank Fraley, and the line was worse than ever.

But maybe the rumors of the rebirth of the Browns' O-line were greatly exaggerated to begin with. Even without Bentley's injury, the line would have still been lacking.

As it turns out, the true weakness of the Browns' line wasn't the center position. It

was the guard position. Flanking the center spot were Joe Andruzzi and Cosey Coleman. Combined with
Fraley
, the trio might have been the slowest and least-athletic interior line in the league, a problem exacerbated when facing the blitz-happy defenses of the
Steelers
and Ravens.

The offseason

For the second straight offseason, Browns GM Phil Savage called in the heavy artillery to address the offensive line. But even last
offseason
paled in comparison to the overhaul Savage performed this spring.

Andruzzi and Coleman are gone. Replacing them is a younger and more athletic group.

Once again, Savage snapped up the best available lineman on the free agent market, signing left guard Eric Steinbach away from the Bengals. He also added guard Seth McKinney, who figures to start on the right side.

Savage complimented his free agent signings by using the third overall pick in April's draft on Wisconsin tackle Joe Thomas. A top-flight free agent signing and top-three draft pick will now be protecting the quarterback's blindside, so Savage at least gets high marks for effort.

Adding to the intrigue is a potential comeback by Bentley, who is trying to rebound from four knee surgeries, two of them to clear out staph infections that almost cost him his leg -- and if media reports are correct, possibly his life.

But even if Bentley makes it back to the gridiron, it would be wise to believe that anything he could give the Browns would be gravy at this point.

The major players

LT Joe Thomas: A beast of a lineman who reportedly has the footwork to set him apart from the Robert Gallerys of the world. There is little doubt that if he gets into camp anywhere close to on time, he's starting. But if he holds

out and it lingers until the third preseason game, the job might fall back to Kevin Shaffer.

LG Eric Steinbach: A self-made elite lineman who was lured away from a division rival. He's been in the league since 2002, so in the aftermath of Bentley's inury
, you'll excuse us if, somewhere in the back of our mind, we're wondering if any of his weight-bearing joints are ticking time bombs. But if he stays healthy, he's a Grade-A signing.

C Hank Fraley: After losing Bentley and stumbling though what seemed like about a dozen starting centers, the last-minute pickup of Fraley was a nice save by Savage.
Fraley
didn't blow anyone away, but considering his limited athleticism, recent history of injuries and the fact that he's closing in on 30, he held his own for the entire season. His grit earned him a four-year extension from the Browns.

It would be wise to assume that Fraley is going to be this team's starting center for the foreseeable future.

RG Seth McKinney: He has two seasons (2004 and '05) under his belt as a full-time starter with the Dolphins. He missed all of last season following surgery to repair a neck disc, so it's been about 19 months since he's seen NFL game action. He'll likely be given first crack at the right guard's job, but his effectiveness is hard to gauge at this point.

RG Ryan Tucker: After losing the final part of last season while seeking treatment for an undisclosed mental disorder, Tucker told The Plain Dealer in March that he's ready to play again. If he can still play at a high level, it appears he'll start at his old job.

Tucker has been the closest thing to a rock that the Browns offensive line has had the past five years, but at the age of 32, there is reason to believe he is on the decline. Of the five projected O-line starters, his future appears to be the murkiest. Shaffer is waiting in the wings should Tucker falter.

T Kevin Shaffer: After the Browns drafted Thomas, rumors begin swirling that Shaffer wanted to be traded if he wasn't going to start. One news report even said

a deal was in place to trade Shaffer to the Giants, but it fell through at the last minute.

Shaffer emerged days later to debunk the trade talk. But you'd have to believe that he isn't going to go quietly to the bench. Shaffer gives the Browns some solid depth at the tackle position, but also poses the threat of becoming a locker-room malcontent if Thomas and Tucker hold onto both starting jobs.

C LeCharles Bentley: All we can do is hope. If he can come back and give the Browns anything this year, go to church and give 10 percent, because you will have witnessed an act of God.

Up next: The receivers