Littered with big names, the Browns cache of recievers has really failed to live up to expectations thus far, and will be counted on to excel in 2007 if the team has any hopes of contention. In Braylon Edwards, Joe Jurevicius, and Kellen Winslow II ... the team has as talented a trio of starters as most teams in the league. The team jettisoned Dennis Northcutt this off-season, traded for Tim Carter, and looks for big things from Josh Cribbs and Travis Wilson as reserves. Erik Cassano analyzes the unit.

Synopsis

If the Browns' offense had a crown jewel heading into 2006, it was supposed to be the receiver corps.

The pass-catchers were highlighted by a pair of Top 10 draft picks in Kellen Winslow Jr. and Braylon Edwards. Both were rebounding quickly from serious knee injuries and expected to carry the load.

Adding depth were veteran speedster Dennis Northcutt and Joe Jurevicius, a sure-handed local boy who had signed as a free agent. The corps also boasted tight end Steve
Heiden
-- a proficient short-yardage receiver -- and Joshua
Cribbs
, who proved to be an electrifying
playmaker
as a kickoff returner.

The Browns' cache of receivers should have been the envy of any team not named the Indianapolis Colts. But like just about everything else involving the Browns offense last year, the receivers never really found a groove.

While Winslow and Heiden flourished as one of the better tight-end tandems in the league, the wide receivers were plagued by dropped passes all season. Northcutt and Edwards were the primary offenders, but even Jurevicius wasn't immune.

The result was a Browns offense that was virtually incapable of making a big play. Charlie Frye's questionable throwing arm and receivers' inability to haul in passes consistently short-circuited Cleveland drives on many occasions.

As with just about every other aspect of the Browns' offense, the receiver corps was sent back to the drawing board this offseason, though most knowledgeable football people seem to agree that the receiving talent is there for the Browns to have a very good passing game. If nothing else, incoming offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski knows that, and will try to build an offense that showcases the talents of Winslow and Edwards.

The offseason

Because the Browns burned two first-round picks on Winslow and Edwards in the past four drafts, there really isn't much to report here. Turnover was minimal.

Northcutt is gone to Jacksonville after dropping a few too many passes to justify a new contract from the Browns. Tim Carter arrived from the Giants in the Reuben Droughns trade and should battle for time at the third and fourth receiver slots. Syndric Steptoe, a 5'-9" speedster, was selected in the seventh round in April and figures to be groomed as a punt returner.

If healthy, Edwards is a lock for the first starting receiver slot. Jurevicius and second-year receiver Travis Wilson appear to be the

frontrunners
for the second starting receiver slot. Carter could move up the depth chart in a hurry if either
Jurevicius
or Wilson struggle.

The major players

TE Kellen Winslow Jr.: After missing all of 2005 recovering from a knee injury suffered in his now-infamous motorcycle accident, Winslow bounced back in a big way in 2006, leading all NFL tight ends by snatching 89 receptions for 875 yards.

Of course, it being the Browns, there was a catch. Winslow had surgery in late January to clear out loose bodies in his surgically-repaired knee. Only later did the public discover that the supposed scope job was actually microfracture surgery, a risky procedure in which tiny holes are drilled in the bones of a damaged knee joint, promoting the growth of scare tissue, which is supposed to serve as
faux
-cartilage.

Youth appears to help a microfracture surgery patient recover. The Phoenix Suns' Amare Stoudemire had the surgery in 2005, missed almost one full season, but showed no ill effects in bouncing back to his old form this past season. Winslow, like
Stoudemire
, is 24, but plays a far more violent game for a living.

Time will tell how Winslow bounces back. As it is, he'll probably have his workload scaled back in training camp. If Winslow is sidelined at all this season, it will hamper the Browns offense in a big way.

WR Braylon Edwards: He's an incredible athlete with first-rate playmaking ability .... provided he can A) hold onto the ball and B) not let off-the-field ego struggles get in the way of his game.

In 2006, Edwards proved to be more adept at running his mouth than running out his routes or holding onto the ball. It appears that Edwards has maturity issues and an inability to handle adversity well, which is something coach Romeo Crenne l has to

focus on from day one of camp. Edwards is one more gum-flapping, pass-dropping season away from jeopardizing his standing as a core member of the Browns' future.

TE Steve Heiden: With all the tumult that has surrounded the Browns offense the past five years, Heiden has quietly become the Browns' most reliable receiver over that span. Since arriving in a 2002 trade with San Diego, Heiden has amassed 1,176 yards receiving and 11 touchdowns.

His production spiked in 2005 with 43 receptions for 401 yards, and remained high last year with 36 receptions for 249 yards.

With a former tight ends coach now serving as the Browns offensive coordinator, Heiden figures to continue as a major supporting cast member in Cleveland.

WR Joe Jurevicius: So far, Jurevicius has made it to the Super Bowl with every prior team he's played for -- the Giants, Buccaneers and Seahawks. If he wants to make it 4-for-4 with his hometown team, he might need some patience and a couple of swigs from the fountain of youth.

Jurevicius is entering his 11th NFL season at age 32. He's still a good supplementary player, but he's starting to enter the portion of his career where injuries will become more and more of a concern. Bruised ribs provided a glancing blow to the offense last year, but losing Jurevicius to a lengthier injury could rob the receiver unit of valuable veteran experience.

Because of Winslow's mircofracture surgery and Edwards' flakiness, Jurevicius is among the most important supporting cast players on the team. A lot rides on his ability to suit up and play every week.

WR Travis Wilson: He declared himself the best receiver in the 2006 draft, despite the fact the Browns took him in the third round. But if you make statements like that, you need to go out and back up the words with actions.

In '06, Wilson played in four games, finishing with two catches for 32 yards.

In '07, Wilson will need to live up to his heady assertion far more than in his rookie year. With Northcutt gone, Wilson is one Edwards or Jurevicius injury away from a major role in the offense. At some point this year, it's highly likely Wilson will be pressed into put-up-or-shut-up time.

But then again, when have you ever known an NFL wide receiver to shut up?

WR Joshua Cribbs: His athleticism is tantalizing. He has the explosive legs to do a lot with only a little room to work. But as of right now, Cribbs remains a wild card, a player who doesn't cleanly fit into any role on the offense.

But if you are over six feet tall with the ability to outrun tacklers in the open field, teams will find a use for you. Cribbs fans need not worry; they will see plenty of the former Kent State quarterback this year.

WR Tim Carter: He's played in 31 of 32 games for the Giants the past two years, so at least we know he has a history of good health. Totals of 22 receptions and 253 yards don't hurt either. Carter is a dark horse who could see some significant playing time if enough things bounce his way.

Of course if Carter is playing a lot, it probably means Edwards, Jurevicius and Wilson are on the sideline for one reason or another, so it's best to hope that Carter's role doesn't increase out of desperation.

Up next: The defensive line