If there was any nugget of unchecked optimism to be taken from the 2006 Browns, it was the linebacker corps ... says Erik Cassano in the latest installment of his position-by-position training camp preview of the '07 version of the team. Kam Wimbley was a best for us, and Leon Williams and D'Qwell Jackson showed real promise. Papa Cass breaks down the Browns linebackers.

Synopsis

If there was any nugget of unchecked optimism to be taken from the 2006 Browns, it was the linebacker corps.

In what was unquestionably the most immediate return on investment yielded by Browns draft picks since the team's return, '06 first-rounder Kamerion Wimbley and second-rounder D'Qwell Jackson stepped into the starting lineup and immediately asserted themselves as budding stars.

Wimbley set a Browns rookie record with 11 sacks, second among NFL rookies, staking his claim as one of the game's rising pass rushing talents. Jackson finished second on the team with 115 tackles, including an impressive 16 tackles in a loss to Carolina, according to the team's official site. Tackles are not kept as an official NFL statistic.

Willie McGinest, though past his prime as an elite pass rusher, added four sacks in 13 starts. Andra Davis led the team with 133 tackles.

The backups were capable, including Chaun Thompson, Matt Stewart, Leon Williams, Mason Unck and David McMillan.

Romeo Crennel and Phil Savage know that the success of a 3-4 defensive alignment depends highly on the talent and versatility of its linebackers. To that end, the job the Browns' leaders did in putting this unit together offers more than a glimmer of hope for the future.

The offseason

For good measure, Savage signed former Texan Antwan Peek in March. Peek, an outside linebacker who started all 16 games for Houston in 2005, is expected to challenge McGinest for his starting job. At this point, however, it's hard to see a seasoned veteran and potential future hall-of-famer like McGinest surrendering his job to a guy with 110 career tackles.

Consider Peek an insurance policy in case he suddenly turns into the Donyell Marshall of the Browns.

The major players

OLB Kamerion Wimbley: What does he do for an encore? Hopefully it involves playing in Hawaii in February. If Savage's capacity as an offensive talent evaluator is called into question for the rest of his career, Wimbley is a sparkling example of Savage's ability to draft top defensive talent.

ILB D'Qwell Jackson: He did what inside linebackers are supposed to do in a 3-4 set: Make tons of tackles. Over the years, Browns middle linebackers have gotten a kind of reputation for being masters of the cheap tackle, dragging a running back down after a 14-yard gain. But with Jackson and Andra Davis manning the middle, I think the heart of the defense is in good shape for a while.

ILB Andra Davis: One of the few players to survive the post-Butch Davis purge, he isn't flashy, but he makes plays. Surrounded by better talent, he might be able to improve his own game now.

OLB Willie McGinest: For a has-been, he looked pretty good a year ago. No one is expecting him to dominate anymore. The wisdom he imparts on Wimbley is far more valuable.

OLB Antwan Peek: He's been a part-timer for all but one season of his career. If McGinest goes down, it's either going to be the opportunity Peek has been searching for, or it's going to expose him as a career bench player.

ILB Chaun Thompson: Another Butch Davis holdover, he is the small and fast type of player favored by the former Browns coach. Now a few years older and a few pounds beefier, he might have started last year if not for the emergence of Jackson. But this team is at its best if Thompson is providing depth off the bench.

ILB Matt Stewart: Another kind of undersized bench player. But, much like Thompson and Peek, he has starts on his resume and has the talent to be at least adequate in a starting role. Playing for the notoriously short-handed Browns, that's a big plus.

ILB Leon Williams: He played his way into the foreground at the tail end of last season, including a 17-tackle performance in an otherwise-forgettable game against Tampa Bay. Again, it's the ongoing mantra: Depth, depth, depth.

ILB Mason Unck: The caveman-sounding name is perfect for a guy who likes to get out and crack some skulls. Not terribly big or terribly fast, he has hustled enough on special teams to warrant a longer look from the coaching staff. Coaches will always go for the scrappy guy who plays the game at 100 miles per hour. That's Unck.

Up next: The secondary