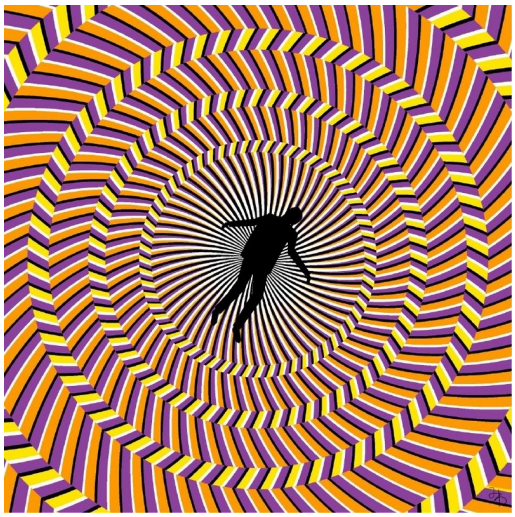
NFL superstars pleading guilty to dogfighting? The Browns scoring on an opening drive, looking frighteningly efficient in doing so? The Indians coming up with clutch base hits late with runners in scoring position? If you're feeling just a bit like your sports world had gone slightly askew, you aren't alone.



If you're feeling just a bit like your sports world had gone slightly askew, you aren't alone. While it's not quite as if we're walking through the looking glass, there still is enough strangeness taking place to make one feel like he has to grab hold of a table just to steady himself from time to time.

First off, of course, was the site of one of the most high profile NFL players standing outside a courthouse in Atlanta shortly after pleading guilty to various charges surrounding his involvement in dogfighting, simultaneously apologizing to everyone he lied to while referring to himself in the third person as if the heinous acts were actually committed by someone else.

You can play the Michael Vick saga out in your mind any way you like. If you want to wear Vick's number 7 jersey in support, like some did yesterday, have at it. If you want to delude yourself into thinking that Vick suddenly found Jesus, as he proclaimed, it's a free country so have at that, too. But if you decide to compare the words of his day late/dollar short apology to the legal document to which he actually plead guilty, you will come to understand that Vick's primary concern was not about what he had done, who he had hurt, or who he lied to, but instead was about making one last stab at salvaging an existence in professional football.

But the Vick case is taking place in Atlanta and while a curiosity everywhere, most sports fans in Cleveland are more concerned about what's taking place in Berea and at Jacobs Field these days. And the events of the last several days from both corners are enough to give you vertigo.

The crispness and efficiency with which the Browns opened the game Saturday night against the Denver Broncos was not just unlikely but almost completely unexpected. With fans, the media and even the coaching staff practically begging either Charlie Frye or Derek Anderson to grab hold of the wheel and not let go, the two have spent most of the preseason like the annoyingly over polite chipmunks from the Looney Tunes cartoons trying to give the job to the other guy. But on Saturday, Frye finally demonstrated, if just a bit, that he finally got the message. While the play of Frye was certainly unexpected, it's also more than fair to suggest that head coach Romeo Crennel's belated revelation that a quarterback is better prepared to play if he knows in advance and not minutes before the kickoff he is starting also may have been at least partially responsible for Frye's improved play.

But what really was askew, ultimately, was the simple fact that the Browns took the opening kickoff, marched the full 80 yards and finished the task by scoring a touchdown. This is simply something Browns fans are not accustomed to seeing. Though this isn't a new phenomena since the return in 1999, given that most fans sense of history spans about two seasons, it's also worth mentioning that first quarter efficiency has hardly been part of the Crennel era either.

The last time the Browns scored a touchdown on their opening drive was on December 3, 2006 against Kansas City. It was their twelfth game of the season. It was also the only time all season that the Browns did score a touchdown on their opening drive. In fact, including the Kansas City game, there were only five games all of last season when the Browns scored any points on their opening drive. The other four occasions were field goals.

Prior to last year's Kansas City game, you'd have to go all the way back to the

second Cincinnati game on December 11, 2005, essentially a season's worth of games, for the last time the Browns scored a touchdown the first time they had the ball. Even more telling, perhaps, is the fact that the Browns were shut out in the first quarter in nine of their 16 games last season. In just two games, only one of which ultimately resulted in a victory, did Cleveland even hold a first quarter lead and that was, again, the Kansas City game. Three other times, they were tied after one quarter, 0-0. In fact, if you want to get really picky, in the Crennel era the most points they've ever scored in a first quarter were 10 points, against Houston, which was the seventh game in 2005.

Thus, to be charitable, getting off to a quick start hasn't exactly been a trademark of the Browns under Crennel. With this sort of macro picture as context it would hardly be unwarranted, even if unwise, for fans to be just a bit giddy over the emerging prospects for this year's edition of the Browns. To this point, though, they're probably just awe struck, the same as they were last week when Brady Quinn successfully executed a two-minute drive.

And if the oddness of the Browns actually looking like a team with a plan from the opening kickoff forward wasn't enough, consider also that Quinn, the putative quarterback of the future, didn't fall flat on his face after his stunning debut. If anything, Quinn did what most fans in Cleveland thought impossible when it comes to the Browns: he followed up one good performance with another.

But if fans expected Crennel to acknowledge what everyone has observed and simply anoint Frye as the opening game starter and Quinn the backup, not so fast. Crennel, demonstrating the full range of his abundant leadership skills, testily, almost angrily, refused to make his thoughts known on the subject. Indeed, he seemed almost puzzled, a recurring theme with Crennel actually, as to why there was such an interest in the topic, almost forgetting that it was he who made it such by declaring prior to training camp that there would be an open competition for quarterback.

Crennel did allow that he had an idea as to who it might be, however, but didn't

offer much else apparently because he hadn't yet had the chance to consult his Magic 8 ball or find his lucky coin.

Still, if the players use the preseason to ready themselves (and in the past that has been an assumption that hasn't necessary been valid), the fans do the same thing. The optimism of the opening of training camp generally fades as the opening of the season beckons and you're left staring head-on at a likely 1-4 start, again. While this isn't to suggest that a 2-1 preseason is cause to reconsider whether to bet your pension on a Browns playoff run, the level of professionalism on the offensive side of the ball, as a result of the hiring of offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski, gives us all a chance to steady ourselves whiling giving pause to consider that even if Crennel can't pull it all together, the Browns won't have to go outside, again, to find their next coach. Which at least means that there is some reason, as incongruous as it all sounds, to believe that the Browns probably are actually pointed in the right direction. The question, as always, is how long will we have to wait until better results follow?

And if the Browns didn't leave your head completely spinning on Saturday night, surely the Indians victory on Sunday finished off the job.

Out of the gate, even the most optimistic fan knew that an Indians/Royals match-up is hardly cause for celebration. For reasons that make about as much sense as ESPN Classic, the Indians can't seem to completely handle this doormat of a team. Over the last two seasons, the Indians are 17-13 against the Royals, which is respectable, but hardly dominating, particularly since the Royals are otherwise 56 games under .500 over that same period.

And while the lack of run support for either C.C. Sabathia or Fausto Carmona this weekend was disturbingly predictable, what was much less so was how the Indians managed to pull out a victory from the jaws of defeat on Sunday.

Down to essentially one pitch, the Indians did something that's been in short

supply for much too long. They showed uncharacteristic, at least as of late, resilience and found a way to tie the game at 3-3 in the ninth. Grady Sizemore blooped a double and Asdrubal Cabrera, playing like the Indians expected Josh Barfield to play, hit a clutch single to bring Sizemore home. Of course, the Indians couldn't finish the job in the ninth, but on display for everyone to see, even if for only a few moments, was the realignment of the stars. The Indians suddenly looked like a team with a bit of swagger while the Royals, were remembering they were the Royals by sleepwalking through the extra innings just waiting for defeat which came, mercifully, incongruously, when Travis Hafner hit a solid single up the middle to plate the winning run. And as if the planet realignment was not quite enough, nearly incongruously Joe Borowski worked a completely uneventful bottom of the 11th for his 37th save.

On Monday night, it was refreshing and, as of late, rather unexpected as well, to see the Indians carry over that swagger against the Minnesota Twins. It was a third straight win and, as importantly, a third straight game in which they actually scored three or more runs. This will either be the beginning of another chapter or a mere smudge on the same page that they've been unable to turn for the last six weeks. This homestand will provide the answer.

Ultimately, though, whether the jolt to the equilibrium that both the Browns and the Indians provided to their fans over the last few days will turn out to be a pleasant buzz or a raging hangover depends on each team's ability to make such performances less incongruous and more commonplace. In each case, though, that may be a case of asking more than either has the overall talent to deliver.