The Browns final game of the preseason is tonight against the Bears, and Gary Benz uses the occassion to pen a great column for us this morning on the preseason in general. Gary argues that there is presently no worse value in sports, and love him or hate him, Art Modell, at least enhanced the experience back in the 80's with concerts and fireworks. Gary also notes that Roger Goodell (pictured) has the preseason on his radar, and changes could be coming soon that will benefit the fans.

It wasn't too many years ago that the NFL referred to the "preseason" as the "exhibition" season and it was six games long, not four. Back then and even now you had the feeling that the only ones who really embraced it were NFL coaches who, if they had their way, would play an endless series of exhibition games in order to give them even more time to pick the 51st, 52nd and 53rd players on the roster.

So it's not a surprise that, like the buzzards returning to Hinckley or the crabgrass returning to your lawn, fans have returned to their annual debate about the preseason in general and the cost of attending such games, in particular. The cost debate is somewhat fascinating in that there are far more fans than actual season ticket holders and it is they who must bear the true burden of underwriting four scrimmages a year.

It wasn't always this way of course. Back in the early ‘80s, when I first became a season ticket holder for the Browns (Section 5, Row L, seats 3, 4 and 5), buying tickets for preseason games was discretionary. I usually bought them anyway but I always had the sense that I was in

the minority on that one, particularly given the rather slender crowds these games attracted.

I'm not quite sure whether the notion of forcing season ticket holders to buy the preseason games started with Art Modell, but if it didn't he certainly was an early adopter. A letter appeared simply showed up one off-season outlining the new requirement and, as you can imagine with all things Modell, there was the typical backlash and complaints about Modell using the fans to once again bail him out of financial straits.

But to Modell's credit, he at least tried to package the two home preseason games into an event instead of the typical night out they've become since the Browns returned. Modell would generally have a pre-game concert with someone like the Beach Boys and a post-game fireworks show, the kind of which you didn't typically see from your local community, in order to try to deliver some value.

At this juncture, though, Randy Lerner and his fellow NFL owners make no such pretense. Believing that any game, including a preseason game, is sufficient value in and of itself, the Browns and the rest of the league treat these almost like any other game. The only problem, of course, is that the only resemblance a preseason game has to a regular season game is the fact that a clock is used and there is a half time. The starters play sparingly and rarely into the second half because if there's one thing NFL coaches fear worse than making a mistake on the 53rd player on the roster it's getting a key starter hurt during the preseason.

Thus fans are left with the Buck Ortegas and Efrem Hills of the world wearing their team's colors and getting significant playing time. If there is a worse value in professional sports, good luck finding it.

This isn't to suggest that teams take a different approach to the preseason in order to give the fans something for their ticket price. Most fans are fine with the concept of the preseason being used for what it should be, an evaluation tool. Most fans likewise readily accept that what goes on in these games generally has little relationship to what will take place when the games start counting.

But what continues to grind is the fact that the NFL establishment, meaning the owners, treat their most ardent fans, or at least the ones most willing to make a serious financial commitment to the franchise, like they're idiots by trying to package these games as something they are not. Putting a gloss on a preseason game to set the illusion that it is just like a regular season game doesn't make it so. Neither does having both NBC and ESPN bring out the regular announcing crews for Sunday and Monday football mean that anyone is buying the notion that an Indianapolis/Chicago preseason game is a legitimate Super Bowl rematch.

But there is hope, in the form of Roger Goodell, the NFL's

commissioner and the best thing to happen to the league since the superimposed first down line on the TV screen. Word is that Goodell has fixing the preseason on his radar screen. Of course, he's also got a potential rookie salary cap and a boatload of player conduct issues on his radar screen as well so it's hard to say when he'll get around to the preseason. But the fact that Goodell at least recognizes that there might be a problem is good news. The hard part, as with anything involving the NFL, is getting something constructive done.

One idea being floated is to cut the preseason by two games and expand the regular season by two games. A variation of that would be to eliminate one preseason game in favor of a 17th regular season game. In a sense, each of those ideas addresses, albeit incompletely, the cost issue. Season ticket holders would still pay for the same amount of games only more of those would be regular season games something most fans presumably would embrace.

But neither of these ideas is particularly popular with other constituencies. NFL coaches are reluctant to give up any more preseason games and it's easy to understand why. The stakes are particularly high these days for coaches and the impatience of the fans and owners alike means that coaches are being given even

less time to make their mark before finding themselves out of one job and looking for another. Having four games allows for more evaluation time and, arguably, helps eliminates roster mistakes. Of course, when your cupboard is bare to begin with, like that of the Browns since 1999, no amount of evaluation time is going to make much of a difference.

The thought behind dropping just one preseason game may appear to be a compromise position, but the biggest problem with it is that it creates a season with an uneven number of games, meaning some teams will end up with an additional home game each year while others will have one less. Goodell's goal, though, appears to be to take some of these games and play them in Canada, Mexico or Europe as part of his efforts to extend the brand worldwide. Preseason games played in these countries in the past have been somewhat popular, but even fans who like their footballs round and not oblong understand the difference between Petyon Manning and Jim Sorgi. Thus, the thinking is that if the NFL is going to extend their brand, particularly given what has taken place with NFL Europe, it's going to take regular season games with big-name players appearing in both halves to really capture the imagination.

One idea not being floated, of course, is the complete elimination of preseason games. Somehow colleges manage to make do without them but in addition to the howl that would get from the coaches, NFL owners simply aren't going to completely eliminate any revenue stream.

It's probably rather unlikely that much will happen with the NFL preseason for the next few years. Indeed, while it's a problem, it's hardly the biggest plaguing the league. As mentioned, Goodell knows he needs to fix the persistent problem of hold outs by first round picks. Goodell rightly points to the NBA as a league that has figured out that a rookie salary schedule is the better approach.

Goodell knows, too, that player disciplinary issues are never going away. Just this summer Goodell has had to juggle the twin tsunamis of Adam "Pacman" Jones and Michael Vick. And despite the high-profile nature of these two cases, too many players can't grasp the message. The bizarre case of Chicago Bears linebacker Lance Briggs and his late night encounter his car had with a light post is but the most recent example.

But when Goodell gets around to fixing the preseason, he need not do anything as dramatic as cutting it in favor of more regular season games or halt the practice of forcing season ticket holders to pay for scrimmages, which is never going to happen anyway. Instead, he just needs to convince the owners to charge less.

According to the USA Today, the average cost of a NFL ticket in Cleveland is around $46. For season ticket holders, the average cost is likely much higher, probably closer to $60. But just cutting that cost by a third ($20) for preseason is probably all that is needed to quell fan dissatisfaction. It would be an overt recognition that the preseason games are glorified scrimmages with a time clock.

Of course it has a slight hit to the bottom line. Cutting the cost by a third in Cleveland amounts to about $40 less revenue per ticket for the preseason or somewhere around $2 million. But if there's one thing we all can have faith in, particularly with Art Modell out of the league, is that this group of owners knows how to make a buck. Finding a way to generate the "lost" $2 million would hardly be a meaningful challenge to them.

Heck, they have harder challenges just figuring out where to park their private jets for away games. But if the interests of the fans means anything, it's something that will at least be seriously considered.