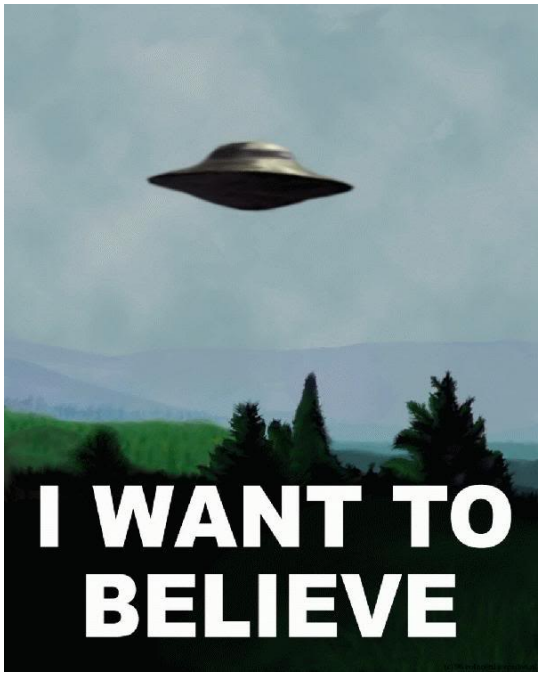
Well, here we are Browns fans. Staring the start of another season dead in the eyes. Will it be more of the same disappointment for the most loyal sports fans in the world? Or will it be the beginning of a new era of Browns football? In his 2007 season preview, Manny Lucas desperately wants to believe that the latter is true, even if it's not what his gut is telling him. BRING ON THE INBRED. It's go time.



" In the NFL, the talent is relative and competitive across the league. We're at a point where we're in the mix. We have a solid core group of 35 players. We have a legitimate NFL roster. It gives us a chance to compete and potentially win a lot of games."

- **Phil Savage**

Truth be told, as much as I like to break off obnoxious run from a fan's perspective, what I really dig is the chess game of trying to figure out what the Browns think of themselves and what they are going to do. After all, it isn't about what WE think so much, it is about what THEY think. And what THEY think determines what they'll expect and what they'll do. So when I read those words from Phil Savage that finally stop the equivocation and pre-existing excuses and up the ante away from managing expectations, I pay attention. . It usually isn't this easy. Phil flat out told us what he thinks of his team in no uncertain terms.

Clearly, Phil believes that he has put in enough work and accrued enough talent for the Browns to finally compete on Sunday. I am only too happy to hold him to

his own words.

I want to believe that this year will be different. I want to believe that every season there are playoff teams that seemingly come from nowhere and only the hard-core fans that were paying attention knew what was possible. I want to believe that once, just once, it will be the Browns. Lord knows that we've been more than patient. And yet I ca…. c…. can.... awe hell I just *can't* do it. I'm expecting more AFC North beat downs and chokes, disappointments by high priced free agents, young players not paying attention and underachieving, and last but not least, plenty of nonplussed vacant stares from Romeo on the sidelines. I expect Phil will moon walk from his above quote and resume bitching about draft choices made eight years ago and how they begat woe in him. I'm expecting about five or six wins.

What the hell is wrong with me?

A constant theme of mine for those following has been that while the offense has every reason to be a work in progress, the defense should be a finished product. Yeah, the run defense in the X season has improved to 16th overall for what that is worth, a huge jump from 27th last regular season. But in all but the Detroit game when Jon Kitna was shredding us through the air we were still giving up over four yards per carry, including five yards per carry to Denver's back ups. On offense, we're 22nd in X season rushing still averaging 3.8 yards per carry. Can't run and can't stop the run is not the formula for *"competing and winning a lot of games"*, but being a fan, what do I know? Style-wise, JaLew is running hard, but he has few lanes. The much-ballyhooed on paper offensive line still has not yet played together and begun to establish continuity and teamwork, and will have to start that process for the first time in game conditions against the Pittsburgh zone blitz. Immediately thereafter, you're talking Cincinnati with it's offensive pressure helping its defense, then Oakland, Baltimore, New England and Miami. Based on last season these are not the type of defensive opponents you want to see a new offensive system, young quarterbacks, a first-year coordinator, and a line that hasn't taken a snap together start off against. The pressure on the Browns' defense will be enormous, and from what I've seen so far they won't be up to it. If we win two of the first five games we have a real shot at a heck of a season. Less

than two wins and the momentum of the runaway train, to coin a phrase, gets started once again. After coming up for air against St. Louis on the road, the Browns would be faced with righting the ship with a home game against Seattle and trips to the capital of Appalachia (Pittsburgh) and the capital of the STD (B-more). The prospect of starting off 1 – 9 or 2 – 8 is not that remote. I don't see the Savage / Crennel Era surviving intact in that case. This team must get off to a good start to avoid the near catastrophic long-term set back of yet another coaching staff and possibly even another GM and a new direction.

Think I'm overreacting?

My main concern with what I've seen of the defense is the front seven. I like the outside linebackers provided McGinest isn't Amy Winehouse and goes to rehab for his back and Twan Peek gets the start. But the defensive line flat out concerns me. I don't know that the old warriors Ted Washington and Orpheus Roye can make it through a whole season and play meaningful minutes at a decent level. I get visions of Jerry Ball and John Jurkovic in 1999. I have some hope that the Smith brothers, Shaun and Robaire, can step up and hold the point of attack. I really don't see bona fide NFL talent in the rest of the rotation. If the loyal Crennel keeps D'Qwell Jackson and Andra Davis as the starting inside linebackers behind this defensive line, then I am in a state of near panic. Or deep depression. Whatever the morning Muni Lot stew renders. So it'll probably be euphoria until 1:30, but I digress. If Leon Williams has done enough to break in as a starter, we'll make more plays, but will we be consistent and will he make the difference?

I like the pass defense on paper, but the X season has let me down somewhat. Like Phil, I believe the talent is there. I think we have the talent to provide pass rush from the outside linebackers and Williams coming from the inside, we have two proven backs in Bodden and Jones if they can stay healthy, and Eric "Easy E" Wright looks like a steal with Defensive Rookie Of The Year potential. If one of Phil's favorite picks, Brodney Pool, is ever going to step up after sitting behind Brian Russell, now is the time. There is solid back up talent as well.

I wish I could say the same about the passing offense. On a frustrating and underachieving team, not seeing Kellen Winslow and Braylon Edwards moving the chains like the crew on *Cool Hand Luke* going out to work in the morning in maddening. While Charlie Frye has temporarily retaken the starting quarterback job as much as Derek Anderson dropped it, Brady Quinn showed all of us enough to where we are all just marking time until he takes over. I've seen enough X season and talked to enough other knowledgeable fans to become convinced that Quinn should not sit on the shelf until next season. Depending upon how well or poorly Frye plays, and how Quinn picks things up, I have the Rams game after the bye week or the Texans game after Thanksgiving as the most likely games for the Quinn Era to begin. The kid excites me as a fan, and unlike some rookies just making plays out of raw talent and luck; he actually seems to be running the show. If he can step in against game planning and get up to speed, the long drought of finding the true heir to BK, or at least Vinnie, appears to be over. How much that helps us in the critical start of the season? I have my doubts.

So allow me to summarize what I think I know:

- Phil lays down expectations to win now.
- We seem to be a bit better running and stopping the run, but still struggling and not quite mediocre by X season standards.
- The offensive line has starters at four new positions and has yet to play together. Two starters enter the season having been injured and the key reserve is suspended for four games.
- The starting quarterback for your Cleveland Browns, ladies and germs: Charlie Frye.
- Every defensive line starter is over 30, two are 35 or older.
- The inside linebackers have shown they can make tackles, but not plays. We are stuck in perpetual Wali Rainer mode.
- The defensive backs have the most potential we've seen here since 1985.
-

We have three very talented offensive skilled position players at various points in their careers and a whole lot of nothing else.

I want to believe. I want to believe that in spite of the brutal defenses we face early that we won't get off to a season-ending start in the first six or so games. I want to believe that we have underrated talent that is as athletic as I saw against Chicago in the first half and we can compete and learn to win now. I want to believe that at least if this season is one of improvement on the field and frustration on the scoreboard that progress is still being made and we're still on the right path. I want to believe that this is the season we win eight games, turn the corner into respectability, and next season we break out and contend for a long time with a solid foundation.

I just don't know if I can.

Awe screw it. The inbred are here Sunday with their slack jaws, mullets, facial hair that last rocked well in 1998, and their stupid, stupid hand rags, easily the lamest tradition in sports. Their traitor wannabes will come out of the woodwork from your own Ohio neighborhoods and front run like they earned it. The Browns are going to finally show some manhood and rise up and kick the living snot out of those arrogant a-holes for you, me, and all of us real fans and send the hill jacks home to their single-wide trailers in Greater West Virginia beaten bloody as if pummeled by old school D cells trying to respond with brain dead comebacks about games played thirty years ago they never saw. We'll use that springboard after beating the fans I hate most to beat the team I hate most four weeks later and start the season 3 – 1 on the way to eight or nine wins. Phil is vindicated. My doubts are silenced.

Why? Because *THIS* year, it's gonna be *DIFFERENT!*

I want to believe.

Don't you?