It's hard to believe it, but the NFL season is already a quarter over. And your Cleveland Browns are one blocked field goal away from being 3-1 and tied atop the AFC North ... and stand at 2-1 on the season at home and 2-1 in the division. In his latest, Mansfield Lucas gives us his thoughts on the team through four games and their prospects for the rest of the season.

Hard to believe it, but the NFL season is a quarter over. And here my liver was just rounding into regular season shape. Our beloved punkin heads are sitting at 2 - 2 in the thick of the meat grinder part of their schedule and the season has been filled with surprises. It's time to take stock.

The Ratbirds Win

I should be happier; I mean downright stupid-giddy. When we swept these foohs in 2001 and smacked the smirk off their beaks I was on top of the world. It was all about pay back on Art Modell and those who enabled his betrayal. The stabba-killah-man (allegedly), Rayenthal, remains from 2001 as do a few holdovers including Matt Stover as Daniel Day Lewis, but the Ratbirds have lost their status as my Team Anti-Christ. I hate to say this, but I've moved on. I really hope that this sort of emotional maturity doesn't seep over into other areas of my life or it's only a matter of time before I start spending the time I waste following sports doing something moronic like developing an investment portfolio. Many years ago, Barry McBride used to always insist that the Appalachians

were the real rivalry and team worthy of our hatred and the Ratbirds were comic relief. Maybe he was right. But I digress.

The win over the Ratbirds was unexpected and yet not inconsistent with the team's play over the first part of the season. The run defense was soft, the pass defense spotty, and the offense surprisingly potent. I'm grading that on the curve considering how strong Baltimore's aging and slightly overrated defense is this season. They may be living off of their early 00's laurels a bit much, but they are still tough to run on.

The Early Returns

Don't look now, but guess which team is 11th in the NFL in yards per game, despite mailing in the first 23 minutes of the season? That's really pretty damn good. The offensive line has been solid after the annual hillbilly beat down, the Souljah is 3rd in the NFL among tight ends in catches, but far and away the leader in yards per catch with a ridiculous 18.3 yards for a tight end. Some wide receivers would hold out for a contract extension with those numbers. He's on pace to catch 80 balls this year. Braylon Edwards isn't among the league leaders in catches, but he's tied for 3rd in the NFL in yards per catch. He's on pace to catch 72 balls, but I'd expect that to climb. After a dismal showing against the hilljacks, like everyone else, he's looked like how the number three overall pick should look. In response to his critics, including yours truly, Braylon has made a fairly bold and definitive statement that the third year is truly the charm for wide receivers. Finally, Jamal Lewis is on pace to have a 1,400 yard season and he also has a gaudy 4.9 yards per carry average.

All of this means one thing: the playmakers we've heard so

much about on offense have finally come into their own. It could be their own maturity and hunger to play up to their potential. It could be there is finally an offensive line that allows them to function. It could be that Rob Chudzinski appears to be an outstanding young coordinator. It could be, yeah, Charlie Frye really was that shell shocked, under-talented, and just plain bad that he was a pair of cement shoes dragging the whole unit down to the bottom of the river like the evidence from an old school mafia hit. Maybe it is a combination of all of that.

The quarterback always drives discussion. The Derek Anderson I see this year is not very different from the guy I saw last season. He has an arm that makes a defense respect the whole field. DA has some good awareness and understanding of the offense allowing him to be decisive. The lack of sacks is a good representation of that. Unfortunately, some of his decisions that are decisive are also costly, and that strong arm often fails him when it comes to touch and accuracy. This guy is an absolute keeper as a backup, and if he continues playing somewhat well it is not inconceivable we couldn't "Scott Mitchell" the next franchise that, oh, hires Mike Lombardo to run their organization. But if Brady Quinn is anything like the difference maker between Notre Lame playing in a BCS game last season and being a fourth service academy this season, and he shows what he did in the exhibition season when he's ready to go; look the hell out. This offense has the potential to be positively game breaking on a weekly basis. Assuming that we can be the highest bidder for JaLew next season, and we keep the parts together and can augment the second wide receiver position, we really should be one of the best offensive units on Sunday

for quite some time.

Going into the season, I expected the defense to be close to ready and the offense to take some time to gel. Follow sports close enough and long enough and it will always make an idiot of you. What is there to write about the defense? We're 30th against the run, giving up 160 yards per game. That's horrible. The good news is that we're better against the pass. We're 29th. That's within 8 yards per game from the bottom ranked team and is paired with giving up league leading 12 touchdown passes. How sad is that? That extrapolates arithmetically to 288 points off TD passes. The top five defenses in the league last year all surrendered fewer than 288 total points all season. This has to present the opposing offensive coordinator with quite a quandary, and is sure to develop the seeds of discord in the opposing locker room as well. Do I jack up my team's stats against the run or pass? Whose contract incentives get the boost by playing the Browns? The running backs' ? The quarterback's ? How do you decide and who do you keep happy?

As the cliché goes, it all starts up front. The Browns

are paying in heavy coin for not investing in the defensive line since Savage arrived. There are only so many tourniquet's to go around in three off seasons, so here's hoping the bleeding brought on by relying on bad free agent signings, poor player development, and over reliance on a now over the hill Orpheus Roye stops next April. No more wide receivers or defensive backs needed. Sadly, big day one draft resources have been expended on the back seven, and there is little evidence to show that they were well spent. Only Cam Rahm Wimbley looks like a player, and unfortunately he looks one dimensional and a little lost playing the run. He's a hard worker who is talented. He should get better. Can the same be said of NyQuill Jackson or Brodney Pool? Pool just doesn't seem to have it any more than did Marquis Smith or Harlan Barnett. Jackson appears undersized and slow, sort of a mini-Wali Rainer without combat boots. Inside linebackers picked in early round two need to be impact starters. Leigh Bodden is solid; if he stays healthy. Romeo is doing the right thing by sticking with the inexperienced, but very talented Eric Wright, who needs to be getting into something a little bit more when it comes to consistency. But you

can easily count about five to seven cats that need to get gone so we can upgrade the defense to bring the talent level up to playoff contention. I just didn't expect that heading into the season. I actually expected the defense to carry the offense.

What's Next?

I know *any given Sunday* blah, blah, blah, but the New England Patriots are as good as any football team I've seen since the dynasty that was America's Crack wagon in the early 1990's. They've won a handful of titles with far less talented teams. After that? I expect the 2 - 4 Browns to enter bye week and begin the phat part of their schedule . Cleveland/LA/St. Louis and Miami are teams that are just not good. I am dying to see how this team responds to traveling to the Capital of Appalachia , and then there's a bunch of mediocre teams and the remaining division foes (sorry, but I don't believe in the Texans). Only Seattle presents the challenge

of being a legitimate non-divisional playoff team. As bad as week one was, as disappointing as tanking out west was, as pathetic as the defense is playing, this team has a real shot at winning seven or eight of the remaining eleven games. It isn't crazy. Oh, they could also easily lose those seven or eight games, but that's what is going to make the remaining two-thirds of the season interesting. Given that a .500 season is in the balance, do they make the change to get Brady Quinn ready for next season, or do they make a clean break to him in the off season? Was Phil serious enough about Quinn's development being as important as winning games to risk a break even season? Is Romeo's job safe? Can the defense play any better at all against the run if they change some things up with rotation and scheme? Will the offense continue to improve? It is very hard to say you know anything about the 2007 Browns. I think rather than knowledge all we have now is varying degrees of ignorance. I do think that for once, maybe twice counting 2002, we should be looking at something a lot more interesting than the latest "runaway train". I anticipate some frustration wrought by inexperience and a poor defense, but I also expect that for the first time in a

long time that December will be for more than to see how many hard core are willing to tailgate in artic conditions. I'm not talking playoffs, but this team has a real shot at flirting with .500. For now, at the quarter pole, I'll take it.