In Gary's weekly "Lingering Items" piece, he says that the first step in a successful rehabilitation is recognition of the problem in the first place. Thus, he takes some satisfaction from the fact that Browns head coach Romeo Crennel acknowledged two great truths on Monday: the his team is, in fact, undisciplined, and he is, in fact, to blame. Gary also hits on the backup QB always being the most popular person in this town and the Winslow call at the end of regulation.

If the first step in a successful rehabilitation is recognition of the problem in the first place, then maybe the Cleveland Browns actually have a chance to deliver on the promise of this season. It thus is with some satisfaction that Browns head coach Romeo Crennel acknowledged two great truths on Monday: the his team is, in fact, undisciplined, and he is, in fact, to blame.

But Crennel having taken that first step means nothing if he can't find a way to actually fix the problems. His short tenure with the Browns suggests, at the very least, that fans should have the same expectations for an effective fix as they had for getting the pony they asked Santa for when they were kids: don't wish for things you'll never get.

The season is now 12 games old and the patterns are more than set: game on Sunday, film on Monday, off day Tuesday, install game plan, prepare for opponents Wednesday-Saturday. In other words, there isn't exactly an abundance of time to double back on re-instilling certain fundamentals. That's

what training camp is for.

At this juncture, there is very little chance that the Browns will suddenly turn into a smart, mentally disciplined team. That's not exactly been a trademark in any of Crennel's seasons. If penalties are one measure of a lack of discipline and preparation, and they are, the Browns currently stand first in the AFC and second in the NFL with 95 penalties. Although Green Bay, a legitimately good team, is right there with the Browns, the rest of their company in this regard, particularly in the AFC is what you'd expect. Right behind them are such underachievers as Baltimore and the perennially penalty-prone Oakland Raiders.

The issue, though, goes well beyond just penalties. Too many times in too many games there are simply mental errors that suggest that there is an institutional shortcoming. He may deal with the media in a much more open fashion than his former boss, Bill Belichick, but clearly Crennel did not pick up Belichick's obsessive attention to detail. It's no coincidence then that this flaw is starting to make a difference just as the pressure and expectations increase.

The fact that the Browns have won three more games this year than last, with four still to play, will undoubtedly earn Crennel another year from GM Phil Savage. In fact, it's not going out on much of a limb to say that even if the Browns finish 7-9 Crennel will be back. But unless or until he fixes these kinds of issues, there will always be lingering doubts about his abilities as a head coach. And unless or until he fixes these kinds of issues, any talk of a contract extension should be shoved further into the background than any talk about reaching the playoffs this year.

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If the chat boards and talk shows are any indication, then the fan base is starting to question the abilities of quarterback Derek Anderson. It's what happens, apparently, when you throw a few interceptions and the Browns lose a game.

Anderson didn't have a great game against Arizona, far from it in fact. He made a number of poor reads, often hoping against hope that his player would somehow emerge with a catch amidst double and triple coverage. And that was when he was relatively on target. He, too, threw a number of passes high, low and behind his receivers even when there was single coverage. He even committed intentional grounding on the very first play of the game. In short, he made a lot of rookie mistakes.

But the Cardinals game doesn't necessarily represent any sort of step back in his development. The truth is that the development of most players, quarterbacks in particular, is rarely a straight line progression. It's bound to be uneven, if only because opposing teams are generally coached by pretty smart guys who can usually figure out ways to counteract what worked for you in other games. They do get the films, after all.

If you look at the big picture, what does emerge is a pretty favorable comparison between Anderson and some quarterbacks who have attained a pretty lofty status. As of this past Sunday, Anderson, in his first year as a full fledged starting quarterback, is averaging 19 completions in 34 attempts per game for 255 yards, two touchdowns and one interception. He also is averaging 7.5 yards per completion.

To put that in perspective, those averages, across the board, are better than the first starting years of Peyton Manning (16 games); Dan Marino (11 games), Tom Brady (15 games), Ben Roethlisberger (14 games) and Troy Aikman (11 games). In fact, Anderson's averages after 12 games (one of which he didn't start) are better than Aikman's second year. To put it in even further perspective, if Anderson's averages hold for the remainder of the season, he'll have more than 300 completions, surpass 4000 yards passing and throw for 32 touchdowns against 17 interceptions. Not even Manning had anywhere close to that success.

Of course, there is a lot of football between now and the end of the season and there are certainly no guarantees that Anderson can maintain his pace. But even

Sunday, in what many view as one of his worst games, he was 21-41 for 304 yards, two touchdowns and two interceptions. This also doesn't mean that Anderson ultimately projects out as an elite quarterback. The league, indeed all of sports, is filled with players who had one or two great years and then couldn't sustain it when opposing teams made their adjustments.

The point, though, is that while there may be much to gnash your teeth about with respect to the Browns (see the first point, above), Anderson is well down on the list if he even makes the list at all. His development, in context, has actually been quite remarkable. If the Browns decide not to hang on to him, Brady Quinn will have a lot to live up to in his first year.

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One of the more hotly debated issues arising from Sunday's loss was whether or not tight end Kellen Winslow II was forced out of bounds on the last play of the game thus nullifying a truly magnificent catch that would have allowed the Browns to win a game they didn't deserve.

By this point, I've seen the replay at least 30 times, which is 29 more times than the official on the field did and still couldn't definitively say whether Winslow indeed would have come down in bounds. In fact, it looks to me like the official made the right call.

According to the rules, if a receiver would have landed inbounds with both feet but is carried or pushed out of bounds while maintaining possession of the ball, the pass is complete at the out-of-bounds spot.

Clearly, Winslow caught the ball. But whether or not it would be considered complete by rule comes down to two distinct issues: was he carried or pushed out of bounds and if so, had he not been would he have come down with both feet

inbounds?

In the first place, it's not even clear that Winslow was pushed or carried out of bounds. He was surrounded by two defenders who also were trying to make a play on the ball at exactly the same moment, which means they weren't instead pushing or carrying him out of bounds. Next, it appears that the defenders did a great job of forcing Winslow to the side of the end zone and, even if they hadn't, that's where Anderson's ball sailed, meaning that Winslow's positioning and the placement of the ball were at least as big a factor as anything else as to why he landed out of bounds after the catch.

It was a great effort, but the official didn't get it wrong. And to the Browns credit, up and down the organization, they didn't complain about it or use it as an excuse for the loss.

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And speaking of the rule book, left unsaid in all the whining by the Baltimore Ravens after Monday night's loss to the New England Patriots is the fact that the referees actually blew a call in their favor, giving the Ravens another opportunity to hold Tom Brady on that critical fourth down play, an opportunity which they squandered.

If you saw the game, you know that it was fourth and one at the Baltimore 30 yard line with 1:48 left. Hold the Patriots and the Ravens can at least salvage a little self-respect in an otherwise dismal season. But just as Brady snapped the ball for the inevitable quarterback sneak, Ravens defensive coordinator Rex Ryan called timeout from the sidelines. As the whistle was blowing, the Ravens were tackling Brady for a loss, thinking they had won the game. Instead, the officials awarded them the time out.

According to the rules, however, an assistant coach is not allowed to call a time out from the sideline, only the head coach or player can. Ryan having done so however the officials could have flagged the Ravens for unsportsmanlike conduct, which would have taken the ball down to the Ravens 15-yard line. Instead, by granting the time out, the officials actually gave the Ravens a chance to stop the Patriots and end their perfect season.

Of course, you won't hear this mentioned by the Ravens. Instead they complained about the holding call on the next fourth down situation, even though it was a blatant penalty. They also complained about Jabar Gaffney's touchdown grab, saying that he didn't have possession in bounds. He did.

All the complaining is a sign of only one thing, Brian Billick is in trouble. Rather than focus on his massive shortcomings as a head coach, he instead has resorted to blaming the officials for his team's plight (remember his rather pathetic claim that the officials robbed the Ravens of a victory against the Browns by actually making the correct call on the Phil Dawson field goal?), a theme his team has now picked up. In the end, though, it's doubtful this tactic will work on GM Ozzie Newsome or owner Steve Bisciotti. If Billick isn't fired at season's end then we know one thing: he's holding incriminating pictures of either Newsome or Bisciotti, or both.

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Finally, it was amusing to read that Arizona Cardinals running back coach Maurice Carthon is not bitter over his "resignation" from the Browns last year. Which begs two questions to ponder as the Browns prepare for the Jets: First, if Carthon truly resigned in the middle of a season, why would anyone think he'd be the least bit bitter? Second, how surprised were you to find out that Carthon actually found another coaching job in the NFL? And since it's the Christmas season, here's a bonus question to ponder: given that Carthon has gone from an offensive coordinator to a running backs coach, will his next job be as the guy who catches the practice kicks before the game?