As the Browns begin to garner national attention and respect, head coach Romeo Crennel has likewise been praised for the job he's done with this year's squad. But what has been the true catalyst for the vast improvement of the '07 Browns? Romeo is a coach of the year candidate, but is he really a driving factor in the team's resurgence? Nick Allburn tackles the issue for us this Sunday.

The Cleveland Browns have seemingly come out of nowhere as a serious playoff contender. As I write this, the Browns are 7-5, tied for the AFC's second Wild Card sport, and have a 63.4 percent chance of making the playoffs according to projections by Football Outsiders .

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Naturally, the narrow scope of national media outlets like ESPN focuses on a few key skill players (i.e. Derek Anderson, Braylon Edwards, Kellen Winslow) and the head coach. No doubt, the Browns have received markedly improved play at the quarterback and receiver positions, but what has Crennel done differently? How much credit does Crennel actually deserve?

Of course when a team is struggling, the head coach will be criticized, and vice-versa. Sometimes the praise and criticism is warranted and sometimes it isn't; a head coach's influence is often difficult to truly quantify. But getting back to the original question at hand, why are these Browns so much better than last year's version? Here's a look at the drivers behind Cleveland's Cinderella season, complete with commentary on who's really responsible for all of this development.

An Apple A Day…

One of the biggest reasons that the Browns are better is that they have managed to avoid their customary mass visits to the Cleveland Clinic. At the 12 game mark, Cleveland offensive linemen are usually wearing "Hello, my name is…"" tags, and keeping the quarterback off of a stretcher, let alone upright, is a tremendous achievement. The NFL is too well-balanced for any team to survive the heightened attrition of a barrage of injuries, and the Browns are no exception.

Obviously, the Browns have not been completely injury free. Several players, such as Willie McGinest, Seth McKinney, and Eric Wright have missed significant time due to injury. But the Browns have yet to suffer the lethal blow of a season ending injury to one or more of the team's most integral players, and unless such a catastrophe befalls them (e.g. LeCharles Bentley), the Browns will remain highly competitive.

The Credit Goes To: Luck

Luck Of The Draw

For once, the Browns received a break from the folks responsible for drafting the league''s schedule. The Browns schedule currently has a collective record of 84-108, a winning percentage of only .438. Although the Browns have won seven games, only one victory has come against a team that presently has a winning record (i.e. Seattle). As a borderline playoff team, sometimes the difference between a playoff birth and playing golf in January is simply the luck of the draw.

While some might contest that the NFL's scheduling formula is responsible for the Browns' good fortune, this really isn't the case. Yes, due to their 2006 fourth place finish, the Browns do play some teams that also finished in fourth. But the only two teams on the Browns' schedule who are not on the schedule of any of the other AFC North teams are Houston and Oakland (who, like the Browns, finished fourth in their respective divisions). This year's weak schedule isn't so much attributable to the Browns finishing in the AFC North''s cellar last season as it is to the North matching up with two divisions that are very weak overall this season, the AFC East and NFC West.

The Credit Goes To: Luck

It All Starts Up Front

General manager Phil Savage made several key personnel decisions in the off-season that helped stimulate this year's improvement, not the least of which being a renewed commitment to the offensive line. Savage first moved to re-sign the solid, if unspectacular, center Hank Fraley to a long-term contract on the eve of free agency. During the '07 free agency, Savage made a big splash early, adding prized guard Eric Steinbach within the first 24 hours of the signing period with a 7-year, $49.5 million contract.

Certainly, the Browns had to overpay for Steinbach, but you can't add premium talent in free agency without paying an equally extravagant price. Savage would later do more to solidify up the line, inking Seth McKinney, a 28 year old guard from Texas A&M.

Finally, Savage made the biggest move of all, sending a mild shock through the football world by drafting Wisconsin tackle Joe Thomas with the third overall pick, in lieu of running back Adrian Peterson or quarterback Brady Quinn. No one with more than half a brain will debate the fact that Thomas was the right pick, especially in hindsight, but at the time it was

surprising to see the Browns pass on the ""sexy" pick of a flashy running back or a high profile signal caller. The Thomas pick made all kinds of sense, but considering that it was made by a Browns franchise that has written the book on high-end draft busts, it was a pick that left fans and media alike in disbelief.

The Thomas pick represents a commitment by Savage not only to throw big money at the offensive line, which the Browns have been doing for years, but to build the line the right way; both with quality draft picks and via a more focused approach in free agency. In other words, the dart board "shoot 'till you hit" strategy that the Browns previously employed when adding free agent offensive linemen, is dead.

The Credit Goes To: Phil Savage

Behind Enemy Lines

Savage also added running back Jamal Lewis by way of free agency. When paired with the trade of plodding incumbent back Reuben Droughns to the New York Giants just days later,

the Cleveland backfield had a brand new look, and many murmured quiet criticisms of the Lewis addition.

Prior to joining the Browns, Jamal Lewis was one of the most hated players within the fraternity of Cleveland fans. Lewis torched the Browns for 500 yards in 2003 on his way to a 2,000-yard rushing year. Along with Ray Lewis, Jamal became a symbol of a Baltimore Ravens team that Browns fans hated at a level second only to that of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

But Browns fans have put aside their initial reactions and embraced Lewis, as he's helped fuel the team's bid for the postseason. The addition of Lewis has given the Browns a bruising, between-the-tackles runner who effectively sets up the play action game, in addition to giving the Browns the best goal line back that they've had since their 1999 return. Lewis has proven to be an excellent signing.

The Credit Goes To: Savage

""He Is The One…"

Perhaps the most publicized change for this incarnation of the Browns has been the astonishing emergence and development of third year quarterback Derek Anderson, who replaced the incompetent Charlie Frye just two quarters into the season opener.

Anderson looked awful during the preseason. In fact, Anderson looked worse than the clueless Frye. But after watching Anderson play almost an entire season, it's easy to see why he looked so bad in the exhibition games: Crennel was alternating series with the quarterbacks. DA is a guy that needs to get into a rhythm, and sometimes it takes him a few drives for him to do so. With Crennel initially auditioning the quarterbacks - one drive for Anderson, one drive for Frye, etc. - Anderson never had the opportunity to show how explosive the offense can be with a strong-armed quarterback because he never found his rhythm.

Don''t blame Crennel for rotating quarterbacks so frequently, because there weren't any clearly superior options. The Browns wanted to see each quarterback both with the first team offense and pitted against the opposition's first team defense, and considering how little the starters play in three of the four preseason games, it was the only way to achieve that goal.

But Crennel is at least partially to blame for not identifying Anderson as the better player in mini camp and training camp. Crennel also might be responsible for Charlie Frye starting the season opener against Pittsburgh.

There was never anything concrete, but rumors swirled in late August and early September that Crennel was in favor of starting Frye, while Chudzinski and Savage preferred the laser-armed Anderson. At any rate, thank God that Anderson wasn't traded over the summer, or worse, released. *Author's Note: Over the summer, I suggested cutting Derek Anderson after the second or third preseason game, when it became clear that Frye would be the starter, at least initially. I am an idiot.*

Crennel substituted Anderson for Frye in the opener, but Koko the gorilla could have made that decision. Coach Crennel certainly isn't responsible for discovering Derek Anderson. If anything, Crennel's handling of the quarterback competition only hindered Anderson's development.

Rob Chudzinski deserves accolades for designing game plans in which the passing game is primarily vertical, and focuses on long and intermediate patterns. Such game plans accentuate Anderson's main strengths of pocket presence and a freakishly strong arm, while taking the onus off of Anderson's Achilles' heel, the short slants and dump off patterns. If the Browns had tried to run a West Coast Offense, for example, Derek Andreson might have already been deposed by the Mighty Quinn.

The Credit Goes To: Savage, Chudzinski, and the Steelers (for exposing Frye)

Bring In The Chud

Installing Rob Chudzinski as offensive coordinator has brought order to a chaotic Browns offense that seemed to invent new and unique ways to implode in recent years. Chudzinski has given the Browns sensible, yet creative play calling, coupled with an

offensive system that plays to the strengths of the offense. Anderson's strong arm, the downfield playmaking abilities of Edwards and Winslow, and Joe Jurevicius to a lesser degree, along with the juggernaut left side of the line composed of Thomas and Steinbach, all have been brilliantly exploited by Chudzinski during Cleveland's scoring renaissance.

Why was Chudzinski hired? It's easy to forget that Romeo Crennel was on the hot seat less than one year ago, when Crennel was essentially given an ultimatum by Savage that there would be significant, non-negotiable changes instituted on Crennel's coaching staff. You can hardly blame Savage for being so active, as Crennel had been guilty of significant cronyism in his first two seasons with the Browns, particularly with the hiring (and retaining after one awful year) of Maurice "Throw Vickers, Throw!" Carthon as offensive coordinator.

After some deliberation, Savage hired Chudzinski, in addition to eight other coaches, replacing nearly half of Crennel's staff (offensive coordinator, special teams coordinator, offensive line coach, strength-and-conditioning coach, assistant strength-and-conditioning coach senior offensive assistant coach, running backs coach, quarterbacks coach, tight ends coach).

Romeo Crennel had nothing to do with hiring Rob Chudzinski.

The Credit Goes To: Savage

Back To Romeo

Crennel was not integral to any of the changes that have made this team so much better than its predecessors, but he hasn't made any noticeable improvements while coaching, either.

Time management has always been an issue for Crennel, and his problems handling the clock have continued this season. *How can this be?* It's baffling to think that Romeo Crennel has coached in the NFL for 26 years, and yet he still struggles to identify the correct moment to stop the clock. From a fan's perspective, Romeo being chronologically challenged is extremely frustrating because time management should be one of the easiest parts of a head coach's job. If a guy can't determine the appropriate time to stop the clock, he's not qualified to lead a professional franchise.

During his time in Cleveland, Crennel has always

struggled to get his team prepared and well-focused going into a game, while also struggling to make the appropriate adjustments at halftime. The proof is in the pudding; the 2007 Browns are being outscored in the first (50-85), third (73-79), and fourth (85-91) quarters, outscoring opponents in only the second (122-83) quarter and overtime (6-0).

While the team's performance in the second half is similar to their opponents'', a difference of only 12 points, it still reflects that Crennel's halftime adjustments don't give the Browns a significant advantage in the second halves of games. More disturbing, though, are the aggregate scores of this year's first quarters, where the Browns are losing by a total of 35 points. To start the game, the Browns have kicked off six times and received six times, so the skewed numbers aren't tainted by an inequity of possession. No, the Browns' first quarter problems appear to simply be the result of coming out of the tunnel flat, lifeless, and ill-prepared, a staple of the

Crennel era.

Another very visible ongoing problem for Crennel has been his complete ineptitude with the use of the coach's challenge in instant replay. Crennel's infamous multiple timeout challenge that may have cost the Browns their week 10 game in Pittsburgh has become the stuff of legend.

Crennel came into the season 1-for-15 on his career coach's challenges, including 0-for-7 his first year, and 1-for-8 last year. This year hasn't been much different, as Crennel currently stands at 2-for-7, bringing his career mark to a bleak 3-for-22. That said, if this trend continues, Crennel will win not one, not two, but *three* challenges next season. Watch out, New England! Book your flight to Tampa for the '08 Super Bowl, folks!

At least Crennel has apparently realized that he's challenge-challenged, as he designated TJ McCreight, the Browns personnel director, the new replay advisor this season. McCreight replaced Jerry Butler, the Browns director of player development, who occupied replay advisor post the previous two seasons. Unfortunately, a new face has done little to change Crennel's luck with the red flag, and one has to wonder how NFL teams don't have replay review down to a science by now.

There are coaches who have excellent records on challenges. In fact, one of the things Butch Davis was best known for during his time in Cleveland was his mastery of the replay system. Maybe Romeo should give Butch a ring down at UNC to ask for a few pointers, because whatever he's doing now, it's not working.

Three concerns regarding Crennel's coaching techniques have been isolated, and standing alone, each concern might be forgivable. HOWEVA, the bigger issue here might be Crennel''s apparent inability to identify and rectify the problems that have plagued him in each of his three seasons as a head coach. It's not easy to be a successful NFL head coach, which is why it's not unusual to see as many as half a dozen head coaching changes in any one off-season. If you can't identify and correct your mistakes as an NFL head coach, your chances for success are severely diminished.

Romeo Crennel has numerous positive qualities; he's a very experienced coach, he''s learned from legendary coaches like Bill Parcells and Bill Belichick, he''s a class act all the way, and he's loyal to his players, never publicly berating or embarrassing one of his

guys. And there's no debating that Crennel has a brilliant football mind, because coaches like Parcells and Belichick are renowned for their abilities to identify and surround themselves with smart people. Hell, it's why other teams keep stealing Belichick's coordinators.

But does Crennel have the ability to think on his feet and adjust on the fly that separates great head coaches from the also-rans? Does Crennel have that elusive "it" factor, or is he just a great defensive coordinator? Two weeks ago I referenced the Peter Principle, insinuating that it might apply to Crennel, and I'm willing to stand by that assessment. Crennel may have been promoted to his point of incompetence.

Like many of the Orange and Brown faithful, I was extremely lukewarm on Crennel at the season's onset. Although the Browns have exceeded all realistic expectations, nothing seems to indicate that Crennel has played a major role in the team''s improved performance. I still don't think that Romeo Crennel is the right man for the job.

Make no mistake, Crennel will be back next season. The Browns' resurgence has earned Crennel some buzz as a coach of the year candidate, which shows just how ignorant the national pundits can often be. Romeo's contract runs through the 2009 season, and unless the Browns absolutely go into the tank next year, it looks like

Crennel will serve out the duration of his contract.

For better or worse, we’re stuck with him. But that doesn’t mean we have to like it.