Jesse Lamovsky can write. He penned his first book a couple months back. He was featured in SI's "Cleveland Collection" issue. And for us here at TCF, he is our resident historian. Few people I know have more knowledge about the history of sports in this town. In his latest effort for us, Jesse banged out a five part piece on Bill Belichick's tenure here in Cleveland. In Part II, we take a closer look at the 1992 season, which was Mumbles second here in C-Town.

Belichick is a generalisimo, and there are those in Cleveland who think that's too much. They would argue that Belichick's personality is roughly as engaging as that of Francisco Franco... It's safe to assume that group includes the fans who listened to Belichick's postgame interview out on the concourse speakers but continued to chant, "Bill Must Go."

- The Sporting News, December 13, 1993

The roll call of villains in Cleveland sports history is a lengthy one, but during his tenure as head coach of the Browns, Bill Belichick gave away little to anyone else in the city's gallery of rogues. Despite transforming the Browns from one of the worst teams in the league into a legitimate contender within four seasons, the coach's popularity proved the inverse of his team's on-field fortunes. Belichick was widely disliked by his second year, and almost universally despised by his third. A playoff run in 1994 failed to win over the fans, some of whom were heard to

grumble that it was kind of a shame the Browns were doing so well, because it meant the coach wouldn't be fired. Shortly after the franchise relocated to Baltimore, the coach was fired, albeit too late for his many Cleveland detractors to derive any enjoyment out of it.

Obviously, Bill Belichick has bounced back. Yet the question remains: how could a football mind so plainly gifted fail so miserably in Cleveland? The superficial analysis says that his regime was doomed from the start by circumstances not of its own making; sucked down in the undertow of the problems that plagued the last years of the original Browns franchise- mere collateral damage from the implosion that rocked the city to its core. And there's a grain of truth to the sentiment. But it's a little bit more complicated than that.

Part I - The 1991 season

1992

The disintegration of the Belichick's reputation among the fans began prior to the 1992 season, his second in Cleveland. Already baffled by the selection of little-known Stanford fullback Tommy Vardell in the first round of the draft, the paying customers were further angered by a 56-3 preseason home loss to the Vikings that was no less embarrassing for being non-existent in the real standings. Belichick also jettisoned longtime Browns receivers Reggie Langhorne and Webster Slaughter that summer. The Browns continued to improve defensively, giving up 275 points in '92, third-lowest in the AFC. But the offense regressed. The line was still sub-standard, Kosar- sacked eleven times in an ugly opening-day loss to the Colts- was oft-injured, the running game was among the league's worst, and the receiver corps lacked quality depth, even as Slaughter and Langhorne played well for their new teams. Vardell failed to score in his rookie season, making his college nickname- Touchdown Tommy- a grim joke for increasingly cynical Browns faithful.

What Belichick did with the offense before and during the 1992 season opened wounds that didn't close. Browns fans were outraged when the veteran receivers were jettisoned and the struggles of the replacements only honed their ire. Belichick sent scat-back Eric Metcalf between the tackles on a regular basis, even though the diminutive Metcalf could be knocked over by a strong wind as easily as by charging defenders. "Metcalf up the Middle!" became a wry punch-line, usually shouted at the TV screen in the form of derisive advice when the Browns were in third-and-long- which was often. There was no equivalent to Charlie Weis or Josh McDaniels in Cleveland. Despite anguished cries from the fans and media to hire a real offensive coordinator, Belichick handled the bulk of play-calling responsibilities himself. Sid Gillman he was not.

It was also in 1992 that Belichick developed an unhealthy fascination with third-string quarterback Todd Philcox, whom the Browns had picked up as a Plan-B free agent in 1991. Injuries to Kosar and backup Mike Tomczak in the first two games, both losses, forced the coach to start Philcox against the Raiders in L.A. and the Browns won 28-16. Eric Metcalf scored all four touchdowns for the Browns, three on passes from Philcox. Metcalf's legs had more to do with the touchdowns than the third-string quarterback's arm. But Belichick saw something no one else saw. Late in the season, he would again insert Philcox into a game- this time without the impetus of injury- and the decision would prove a body blow to his career in Cleveland.

The Browns were 5-5 and in the thick of the playoff hunt when they headed to Minnesota to take on the Vikings, who were 8-2 in Dennis Green's first season at the helm. Thanks to inspired play by the defense, the Browns led 13-10 in the fourth quarter when Belichick yanked starting quarterback Mike Tomczak (himself filling in for the

injured Kosar), and inserted Philcox. Moments after entering the game, Philcox threw an interception which Minnesota cornerback Audray McMillan returned for a touchdown, giving the Vikings a 17-13 lead. They would hold on to win by that score, despite garnering a meager 141 yards of total offense. Columnist Don Pierson of the Chicago *Tribune*
called Belichick's quarterback switch "the dumbest thing I've ever seen a coach do in my life." Cleveland tight end Scott Galbraith was more succinct, simply stating that commenting on the decision would amount to "occupational suicide".

The Browns rallied to go over .500 at 7-6, but were blown out in Detroit by a bad Lions team and lost their last two, at home to the Oilers and at Pittsburgh, to finish 7-9. Again the Browns found ways to lose close; four defeats by a total of twelve points, including three at the Stadium in the last two minutes in front of increasingly frustrated fans. To make matters worse, the rookies were almost a total washout. Touchdown Tommy Vardell couldn't find the end zone, and the second-round pick, San Diego State receiver Patrick Rowe was injured the entire season and never caught a pass for the Browns. Third-round pick Bill Johnson, a defensive tackle from Michigan State, was a bust. After two seasons, Bill Belichick had a record of 13-19, hadn't made the playoffs or even cracked the .500 mark, had a draft record that was mediocre at best- and his seat was beginning to warm up. By the end of the next season, it would be white-hot.