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. In Part III of this four part series, Jesse Lamovsky takes a look back at Mumbles days here in C-Town, focusing specifically in this installment on the years when things really started to slip away from Bill here in Cleveland ... 1993 and 1994.

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."

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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

Part II - The 1992 season

1993

The relationship between Belichick and Kosar crumbled in ‘93. Kosar thought the play-calling was predictable and over-conservative, and made no bones about it- in the words of Eric Metcalf, "BK audibled on every play." Belichick in turn suspected the quarterback was working against him in the clubhouse. Both were probably right. Prior to the season the Browns signed Bernie's old college teammate Vinny Testaverde as a free agent, and Belichick swapped quarterbacks several times even as the team started off with three consecutive wins and assumed first place in the AFC Central.

The Browns were still in first place at the beginning of November when the long-festering situation between coach and quarterback finally came

to a head. With Cleveland trailing the Broncos 29-7 in the fourth quarter at Municipal Stadium, Kosar ignored a play sent in from the sideline, drew up his own- literally in the dirt, as the story has it- and hit Michael Jackson with a touchdown pass. That did it. The next day, November 8, 1993, the Browns announced Bernie Kosar's release, with Belichick infamously citing the quarterback's "diminishing skills" as the reason for the move. So anxious was the coach to rid himself of Kosar that he did so while Vinny Testaverde, his hand-picked replacement, was on the injured list. The luckless Todd Philcox became the interim starter. In his first start, Philcox committed four turnovers and was sacked for a safety in a horrid 22-5 loss to the Seahawks in the Kingdome. "I didn't think it was a bad performance," said Belichick.

Two days after his release by Cleveland, Bernie Kosar signed with Dallas. The following Sunday, while the Browns were having their brains beaten out in Seattle, Kosar placed in place of the injured Troy Aikman and guided the Cowboys to a win over the Arizona Cardinals. The game was televised in the Cleveland area- and nearly matched the ratings of the Browns-Seahawks contest.

The Browns fell apart after the release of Kosar. Eric Metcalf said that the move was "like leaving us to die." They lost seven of their last nine and finished 7-9, their fourth consecutive losing season. Attendance had dropped- it was still very good by NFL standards, but it wasn't the 79,000-strong packed houses of earlier years. The close losses continued, including three by three points or less during the late swoon. Belichick was now 20-28 as head coach of the Browns, and 7-17 in the second half of the season. Three years into his tenure, the Browns continued to languish well behind Houston and Pittsburgh in the Central Division. People were tired of losing, tired of Belichick's terse

secrecy, tired of his games with the quarterback spot, and disillusioned by the release of the most popular player in franchise history. By the time the Browns made their own leap in 1994, it was too late for the coach.

1994

Belichick's rebuilding program finally bore fruit in '94. After splitting the first two games, the Browns ripped off five straight victories, giving up just 42 points in the process. The 6-1 start was the best for the franchise since 1963. Vinny Testaverde began his post-Tampa Bay renaissance, Leroy Hoard solidified the tailback spot, and the rebuilt offensive line was adequate, if not overpowering. The real story, though, was the defense- specifically, the play of Eric Turner. E-Rock had always been a hitter, but in '94 he became a ball-hawk, leading the league with nine interceptions, including one he returned 93 yards for a score to punctuate a 32-0 rout of the Cardinals.

Leading the AFC Central by a full game, the Browns began to alternate victories with defeats, and began to lose ground to the resurgent Steelers. Cleveland's winning streak came to an end in Denver (Belichick went 0-4 against the Broncos as Browns coach, at least one element of his tenure that was painfully familiar to fans). After wins over the Patriots and Eagles, Joe Montana and the Chiefs came from behind to beat the Browns 20-13 at Arrowhead, dropping Cleveland into a first-place tie with the Steelers. The Browns trounced the suddenly dismal Oilers 34-10, than the Giants got a late field goal to edge the Browns 16-13 at the Stadium, dropping them to 9-4 and behind Pittsburgh in the standings. But Belichick's finest victory as coach of the Browns was still to come.

The Saturday after the loss to the Giants, the Browns ventured to Texas Stadium to take on the two-time defending World Champion Cowboys, who were fighting for home-field advantage in the NFC playoffs. Dallas took a quick 7-0 lead on a Troy Aikmen-to-Emmitt Smith touchdown pass, but the Browns bounced back to tie it. While Belichick's defense shut down Dallas's galaxy of offensive stars, his offense ground their way to three Matt Stover field goals and a 16-7 fourth-quarter lead. Emmitt Smith's second touchdown cut the lead to 16-14, and Stover added his fourth field goal to make it 19-14. The Cowboys got the ball back at midfield with one last chance to win. Aikmen quickly passed Dallas down to the Cleveland seven-yard line. With time left for one more play, Aikmen found Jay Novacek over the middle. Novacek dived for the goal line and the win... and was stuffed by Eric Turner bare inches short, setting off a wild celebration by the men in the shiny orange helmets, and even their flat-lining coach. Now the Browns would travel to Pittsburgh to take on the Steelers, with one last chance to throw the division race into a tie.

It didn't happen. Pittsburgh quarterback Neil O'Donnell hit Yancey Thigpen for a 40-yard scoring strike three-and-a-half minutes into the game, giving Pittsburgh a 7-0 lead, and they dominated thereafter, winning 17-7 and clinching the AFC Central title. The best the Browns could do was a wild-card berth, which they clinched in a 34-9 romp over the Seahawks in the final week of the regular season. Cleveland's 11-5 record was its finest since 1986, and its six Pro Bowl representatives were the most since 1987. The Browns had given up just 204 points, lowest in the NFL and the eighth-lowest total since the league went to a sixteen-game schedule in 1978. It was an impressive accomplishment which was somewhat obscured by the turmoil and controversy that besieged his reign as coach.

It was a match-up of student and teacher in the AFC wild-card game, as Bill Parcells's Patriots, winners of seven straight, came to Cleveland for a re-match of a regular-season meeting Cleveland had won, 13-6. The Browns took an early 3-0 lead, fell behind 7-3, than regained the lead on a touchdown pass from Testaverde to his old Tampa Bay teammate Mark Carrier. A Leroy Hoard touchdown and a Stover field goal helped the Browns hang on, 20-13. It was the franchise's first playoff victory since defeating Buffalo in the '89 divisional round, and it set up a third meeting with the Steelers, to be played at Three Rivers Stadium.

It was no contest. The Steelers jumped out to a 17-0 lead and led 24-3 at halftime, on the strength of a relentless ground attack that piled up 238 yards for the game. A late touchdown pass from Testaverde to young Keenan McCardell was offset by a safety that made the final score 29-9, Pittsburgh. The third loss of the season to the Steelers made for a bitter end to an outstanding season. But it would get a lot worse.