What a crazy year for the Browns offense. They draft Brady Quinn and Joe Thomas in April. Quinn holds out, Charlie Frye wins the job, melts down in the opener, is dealt immediately, and then Derek Anderson emerges to win 10 of the last 15 games and throw for almost 30 TD's and 4,000 yards. In the first installment of this three part season wrapup piece, Mitch takes a look back and a look ahead at the Browns offense.

This is the first of a three part series looking back at the 2007 Cleveland Browns, along with taking a look at the future through a Jagermeister-filled Crystal Ball (yes, I can plagiarize from my own entertainment columns). In the second part, I'll look at the defense, and in the third part I'll look at the Special Teams, Coaching staff, and Front Office.

Please Stay in the Car Until the Ride Comes to a Complete Halt

Which happened at about 11:30 PM ET on December 30th.

Or you could say that it occurred about two and a half hours earlier when Jim "All of Indianapolis Prays Peyton Never Gets Hurt" Sorgi took his first snap against the Oiltans.

Or if you're really paranoid, you could say it occurred a few hours before, when Tony Dungy and Jeff Fisher met in an underground parking lot near the RCA Craphole where Fisher promised that Albert Haynesworth wouldn't step on the faces and crotches of the Colts lineup if Dungy agreed to pull the starters like it was the fourth pre-season game.

Or if you're the typical pessimistic Browns fan, you can say it happened right about the time D.A. (can mean both Derek Anderson and Dumb Ass) was throwing his fourth laser beam into the waiting arms of a Cincinnati Bengal.

In any case, the Browns had double-digit wins for the first time since their rebirth. They started the season as "locks" for last place in the AFC North according to most "experts", but ended up tied with Pittspuke for the division lead, losing out on a tiebreaker due to losing twice to the hated Inbreds.

What We Saw

We saw expectations as high as they have ever been in April, following one of the greatest drafts the Browns ever

had. I haven't seen that much man-love for one guy (Phil Savage) since Fabio was in his heyday. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

We saw those dreams sputter like a Corvette using 87 octane gasoline as the QB situation turned into an August mess.

We saw a team rise from the ashes of Charlie Frye's toasted body into a contender.

We saw an offense that could light it up as well as any Browns team led by Brian Sipe or Bernie Kosar.

We saw a defense that changed from the bright spot of the 2006 Browns into a joke that ranked 32nd in the NFL for most of the season.

We saw last minute finishes that kept the stomach

acid churning at "dad with a 14 year old daughter out on her first date" levels during almost EVERY STINKING GAME.

Mostly, we saw what we, as Browns fans, have prayed to see since The Hoodie was mumbling into microphones in 1994...a competitive Browns team. They fell just short of the playoffs, but it was an unexpectedly great year nonetheless.

2007 Offensive Line

To say this was the best offensive line the Browns have had since coming back into the league is sort of like saying that a pint of Guinness is the best beer you've had in years...because all you had been drinking was Iron City.

I'll take "No Duh" for $1,000, Alex.

But we still weren't that sure at the start of training camp. Due to the typical "Expecting the Worst" attitude of so many Browns fans, there were fears that Joe Thomas would be another Robert Gallery, and Eric Steinbach would have a leg removed by a chainsaw wielding dwarf as he ran out the tunnel for the first practice.

Thomas had a few people nervous in the first few practices, as he didn't have the most auspicious start when going against the first team. On the other hand, I liked what I saw immediately, despite the learning curve, as reported in my first Random Thoughts column from Berea

"Great seeing Joe Thomas on the field for the very first practice. There is a lot of potential here, but any thoughts of instantaneous induction to the Hall of Fame were tempered when Joe was tossed like a rag doll in his first rep with the first team. A few snaps later, Joe was introduced to the insane speed of the NFL in the form of Kamerion Wimbley blowing by him like he was standing still. But Joe later recovered, and had a couple of nice pancake blocks. What has impressed me the most is his technique and his obvious intelligence. And we've all heard about his legendary work ethic. This one is going to be a keeper."

Guess I got that one right. Blind Squirrel? Meet Acorn!

Thomas has been nothing short of amazing.

There seems to be some argument amongst the stats people on whether Joe gave up ONE sack for the entire year, or TWO. For the likes of Lomas Brown, Ross Verba, Roman Oben, Barry Stokes, or LJ Shelton, those numbers usually applied to a SERIES.

Pro-Bowl in his rookie year (the first Browns Offensive Lineman so honored since Cody Resien in 1987)...second in Offensive Rookie-of-the-Year voting to superstar Adrian Peterson...and arguably the main reason why the Browns offense took off in the way that it did, plus giving up only 19 sacks for the entire year. Short of the proverbial "what the hell is that?" type of injuries we always dread (see also; Bentley, LeChuck), Thomas will be anchoring the line for the next 10 years, and will spend parts of every single February in Honolulu.

But don't underestimate the contributions of Eric Steinbach to Thomas's growth, nor to the play of the Browns. Steinbach is the type of road plowing guard that has been missing from the Browns since the days of a Dan Fike or Robert E. Jackson, and has been the best free agent pick up seen in the Phil Savage Era. First alternate to the Pro-Bowl at guard, I think Eric was shafted as well.

Credit also needs to go to both Kevin Shaffer and Ryan Tucker. Shaffer signed a big free agency contract in 2006 to be the LT, then got his replacement signed the very next year, despite the fact that Shaffer didn't stink up the joint. That's got to be a blow to the ego, although I always thought he's more suited to the right side. And prior to signing with the Browns, that's the type of tackle he was, protecting the front side of lefty Michael Vick from the LT spot...same as a RT for a right

handed QB.

Granted, Shaffer did spend a little time doing his best "I get paid millions of dollars a year, but I'm not appreciated" whine...and made a couple of minor grumblings about not wanting to switch over to the right side; especially if it meant that he might not even be the starter. But once training camp started, he shut up.

The same professionalism was shown by Ryan Tucker, the most tenured member of the O-Line. But after still getting paid a boat load of money while missing the last part of 2006 because you went all Dave Chappelle mentally tends to make a person a little more grateful when your employer welcomes you back.

What Tucker's return gave most was something totally unheard of; quality depth for the Browns at the offensive line...a phrase heard about as often as "do anything you want to the girl, but leave me alone!" (except in Baltimore, where the denizens know how tough their crack-hoes are).

The depth was needed when Seth McKinney went down to a season ending leg injury. MuthaTucker had already being seeing lots of action at the RG spot, in addition to lots of snaps at RT, so he was able to seamlessly step in for McKinney.

The Browns might even have been better with Tucker. Jamal had some of his best games late in the year, and it may not have been a coincidence that it was with Tucker at RG.

Hank Fraley was often credited as the leader of the line, and the most underappreciated lineman. This may have been so, but he did have problems late in the year.

2008 Offensive Line

The left side is obviously set for the next several years with Thomas and Steinbach. Likewise, the right tackle position is secure with Kevin Shaffer.

The rest? It might need some tweaking. Ryan Tucker will be 33 when the season starts next year. Hank Fraley will be 31. Seth McKinney is an unrestricted free

agent.

Hopefully, all three will be back and able to perform at the same levels. While McKinney might have been due a huge paycheck from the Browns or another team as a FA, his injury did nothing to cure his reputation as injury prone, and it'll cost him a lot of money.

The X-factor in all of this is LeCharles Bentley. He was shelved for a second full year due to the horrific patella tendon tear he suffered on the first day of Training Camp in 2006, and the subsequent staff infections that almost killed him.

The man wants nothing more than to come back and play for the team he idolized as a child. Do not sell this type of dedication short. I expect him to contribute at the RG and center positions in 2008...and I expect he'll be the starting center by mid-year.

More depth will need to be cultivated. Unrestricted free agent Lenny Friedman? Don't let the door hit you on your slow ass on the way out.

2007 Receiving Corps

A Browns receiver has went over 1,000

yards in a season ten times in the glorious history of the franchise.

Two of ten came this year, with Braylon Edwards garnering a team record 1,289 yards, (along with a team record 16 TDs), and Kellen Winslow adding 1,106 yards, good for 4th place on the all-time Browns list.

Then there was Joe Jurevicius, "only" grabbing 50 catches for 614 yards...and I think 49 of those catches were for first downs.

I will once again risk a "slight shoulder separation" by patting myself on the back for my words in Training Camp about Mr. Edwards:

"Who was that guy wearing number 17, and what did he do with the mouth known as Braylon Edwards? The guy I've seen out there seems determined, fluid, and destined for a break out year. The light looks to have gone on in Mr. Edwards head, and he's looking like the best WR we've seen wearing the orange helmets since Bernie was throwing the ball. "

Don't worry...when it gets to the points where I'm talking about the quarterback situation or Jamal Lewis, I'll balance things out by pointing out how wrong I was back in July.

But in Edwards' case, this was a truly magically season that culminated in his selection to the Pro Bowl. Braylon has joined the ranks of the true elite receivers in the NFL in the eyes of all of the experts. I know that there are some bloggers out there that still want to gripe about his drops. To them I say, "get over yourselves, you whiny little bitches!". Terrell

Owens has always dropped passes. Randy Moss drops passes. Even Jerry Freakin' Rice dropped passes.

With Braylon, I look at it sort of like I do with a quarterback's TD/INT ratio. If he has a 2:1 ratio of "passes he caught that 90% of the receivers COULDN'T catch" compared to "passes he dropped that 90% of the receivers COULD catch", then it's a good thing.

That may not satisfy the more pessimistic of the bloggers; but they

are the type that would bitch if their beer was cold, so I just ignore them.

One thing that occurred in the 2007 season was that Kellen Winslow emerged as not only the face of the Cleveland Browns, but also their heart and soul. Gone is the selfish, cocky "souljah" of 2004. What stands in his place is a man that loves to play football, and will do so with 110% of his body and spirit, totally disregarding his own well being for the sake of the team.

Is he still cocky? Absolutely. But it's the type of cockiness I want to see out there now...a player that demands perfection of himself, and places winning above anything else.

For the rest of the receiving corps, it wasn't much of a year. Steve Heiden was made an honorary offensive lineman, as he was often in the lineup as the blocking TE with Winslow in the slot. His 12 catches represented his lowest output in a Browns' jersey, but it doesn't mean that he wasn't a valuable contributor, as his blocking was superb.

Superb is not a word that could be used to describe the other Browns' receivers...particularly Tim Carter and Travis Wilson. Wilson, the self described "best receiver in the 2006 draft", was inactive in all 16 games (creating my famous "Travis Wilson Memorial Inactive List"). Carter only had 8 catches, and probably twice as many drops.

Josh Cribbs continues to be a work in progress, only catching 3 passes all year. But he's a threat any time he's in the lineup, and also gained 61

yards on the ground on reverses or direct snaps.

Cribbs' two point conversion in Arizona where he took the direct snap, started out as if it were a QB draw, and then pulled up to toss a short pass to a wide open Winslow was a thing of beauty.

2008 Receiving Corps

Together, Edwards and Winslow are a pair of Pro-Bowl receivers who create nightmares for 31 defensive coordinators in the NFL (they might also even give Grantham nightmares...who knows what goes on in that hyper SOB's mind).

But take Edwards away from Winslow, or vice versa, and you have Kobe Bryant when Shaq was taken away...minus the rape charges, "trade me" daily demands, and having the

coach's old lady posing naked in "Playboy" (something normally reserved only for "friends" of Browns' quarterbacks).

Why? Because if one of them were gone, the defense could focus their entire game plan around stopping the other. Joe Jurevicius may be a great 3rd down clutch possession receiver, but he doesn't scare anyone. Tim Carter? Travis Wilson? I'd rather pick up Quincy Morgan and Darrin Chiverini off

whatever arena league they're playing in than trust those two wastes of uniforms.

Something has to be done this off season to beef up the depth in that department, because they cannot count on that level of luck when it comes to injuries in 2008. Jurevicius will be going through his farewell tour, and is not your prototypical second receiver anyway (but since Winslow IS the second receiver...and often the

first receiver, maybe that isn't that big of a deal).

Neither Carter nor Wilson should be taking up a roster spot next season. Phil needs to grab someone off a waiver wire, or for a small price off their Free Agent budget. Don't possibly think about any of the big name receivers available in free agency (or via trades). No way would a Randy Moss, Chad Johnson, Brian Berrian, or Patrick Clayton

consider coming to Cleveland knowing that young guns Edwards and Winslow are entrenched.

The best shot might be someone like Drew Carter of the Panthers...another former Buckeye who has underachieved in Carolina as the #2, but may flourish as the #3.

The wild card in all of this is the growth of Joshua Cribbs as a receiver. If he can ever develop into a competent route runner, then the Browns will be set at WR, needing only depth in case of injury.

The Browns are already set at tight end for 2008. Heiden is a great blocker who is still a capable backup for Winslow, and Dinkins is a mauler and a decent special teams player.

Keeping all of them away from high performance motorcycles was also be advised.

2007 Running Backs

Who could have possibly predicted that the man once derided as "8-Ball Jamal" would end up being such an important contributor to the Browns? And

not just on the field, where he was exceptional, gaining the most yards in Browns history by someone not named Jim Brown, but as a leader in the locker room as well.

This was considered a big gamble by Phil, as all the experts looked at Jamal's age, recent results, and injuries; concluding that he was finished. So eyebrows were

raised when Savage traded away Rueben Droughns after signing Jamal to the one-year deal, with the line of thought being that if Lewis failed, the Browns would be screwed.

So who looks like a genius in retrospect? Jamal is the perfect runner for Rod Chudzinski's vision of a balanced attack with power running and vertical passing.

The best aspect of Jamal's year was that he got stronger not only as the individual games went on, but also as the season progressed. Which is exactly what you want to see from a power running back when the always fickle Cleveland Decembers start to hit.

Jamal did miss the better part of two games right before the bye due to a foot/ankle injury,

during which time Jason Wright and Jerome Harrison filled in admirably. Throughout the season, Wright was solid in spelling Jamal and valuable as a third down receiver/blocker. Harrison also showed flashes of talent, as the smaller, speed back ran for a 6.2 yards per average, which lead to me going as spastic as Al Pacino whenever he was listed as "inactive" for a game.

The two highlights of the running game this year was Jamal's 216 yard performance against the Bengals in the second week shoot out, and his 163 yard power display in the Snow Bowl against the Bills.

At Fullback, the Browns are set for years, as Lawrence Vickers did a fantastic job as lead blocker and occasionally toting the rock on short yardage

situations. A third alternate to the Pro Bowl in just his second year, all Vickers needs is to work a bit on his pass catching, and he will also be finding yearly invites to Hawaii.

2008 Running Backs

RESIGN JAMAL!!!!!

This has got to be priority 1B for Phil Savage (1A being to fix the defensive line). Jamal likes it in Cleveland, and understands that in today's NFL, running backs not named Tomlinson or Peterson aren't that highly valued (Larry Johnson, anyone?).

A three year deal with incentives would be perfect,

allowing Jamal to still be The Man in 2008, but perhaps with a lesser role earlier in the year as the Browns work Jerome Harrison into the line up a bit more to be the Browns version of Willie Parker to Jamal's Jerome Bettis.

If they don't think Harrison is the answer, then they might

need to consider picking up a RB in the third round.

In either case, Jason Wright sticks around as the backup.

2007 Quarterbacks

Hunter S. Thompson himself couldn't have written a more bizarro scenario than the QB situation for the Browns this season.

Pick Golden Boy QB from Columbus who grew up worshipping the Browns...and then see him blow any chance to win the starting job by holding out.

Try to give the job away to Derek Anderson in training camp...and then see Anderson handle the pressure with all the composure of Britney Spears behind the wheel of a vehicle.

Flip a coin to see which of the two "veterans"

should start in an exhibition game...and then be upset that the coin didn't land on the ‘none of the above' side as only Quinn's play could be described as "not sucking raw eggs".

Start Charlie Frye against the Steelers...and then see him melt down quicker than the Wicked Witch of the

West after receiving a bucket of water to the face.

Trade Frye two days later, throwing Anderson to the wolves to hold down the fort for a few weeks until Brady Quinn is ready...and then see Anderson go All World for half of the season.

Look towards the playoffs with Anderson as the undisputed leader...and then see him single handedly give away two games to Arizona and Cincinnati, keeping Cleveland out of the playoffs.

2008 Quarterbacks

In my Random Thoughts after the first exhibition game against the Chiefs, I made a comment about the QB situation, and called it "Abusing a No-Longer-Breathing Four Legged Kentucky Derby Participant".

Nothing has changed.

There is a full blown QB controversy going on...if not in Berea, then certainly in the hearts and minds of Cleveland fans everywhere. And if both Quinn (certainly) and Anderson (maybe) are on the roster together once training camp starts, it will be rearing its ugly head for months.

We have heard all the reports stating that Phil wants to sign the restricted free agent Anderson to a long term contract. We have also heard the stories about them being "open to discussions" for trading DA.

It is completely in the realm of possibilities that the Browns have both QBs for the entire 2008 season. It is my belief that if that is the case, Quinn can beat out Anderson in training camp. (It's also my belief that green vegetables are bad for you, so take all of that with a few tons of Morton Salt).

Anderson has proven that he would provide a negative answer to Jeff Foxworthy's game show on Fox. Nothing wrong with Dumb Quarterbacks...Pittspuke got by for years with a country hick who basically wore his IQ on his back. But DA didn't have the same supporting cast that Terry had in the 70s.

But even if DA may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, he has to be smart enough to look back at the 49ers game with some trepidation, seeing how Quinn going into the game caused a noise in Cleveland not heard since the Beatles played there.

Do you think Anderson is going to WANT to sign long term to a team with a Rock Star level backup chomping at the bit to replace him? Especially when DA can look in the stands and see about 500 number 10 jerseys for every number 3 jersey out there?

And then you add on the fact that DA has to know that Chicago, Minnesota, Atlanta, Detroit, Kansas City, Miami, or Carolina would love to have him as the undisputed #1 QB?

The Browns say they want to sign Anderson. But does Anderson want to

sign with Cleveland unless he has assurances that Quinn will be shipped off?

As stated, it is my belief that Brady Quinn will be the starter next year. Whether Anderson is holding a clipboard next to Romeo, or is taking snaps in the NFC or for the

Dolphins is what needs to be determined.

Next column...the Defense.