Johnny on the spot for us all season on the Browns beat, Mitch continues his analysis of what we saw in 2007 from the Browns with a look at the much maligned defense. Mitch loves the move to promote Mel Tucker to defensive coordinator, and goes position by position in assessing the season that just ended, and also looking ahead to what he thinks the Browns defense is going to look like in 2008 once we get through free agency and the draft.

This is the second of a three part series looking back at the 2007 Cleveland Browns, along with taking a look at the future based on nothing other than my b.s. beliefs. In the first part, I looked at the offense , and in the third part I'll look at the Special Teams, Coaching staff, and Front Office.

I'll have a side order of Tums, with a Maloxx chaser, please.

The Browns defense in 2007, to be as kind as possible, were to football as Barry Manilow is to heavy metal.

Ranked 32nd most of the year, they had an end of the year

"push" that saw them get all the way up to 30th, after having their last two home games being played in a blizzard, and then playing against Chris Weinke, who may have only been able to pass for 100 yards against the

Shelby Whippets

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It was a unit that made up for its cluelessness by being old and slow. When you needed a big stop, you're only hope was in eating an entire block of cheese, because the defense could normally only be counted on to give the ball back to the offense after the subsequent kickoffs.

While the pass defense was nothing to write home about, ranked 24th in the NFL, it was the rush defense that was truly abysmal, giving up almost 130 yards per game on the ground. Running backs Willie Parker (twice), Rudi Johnson, LaMont Jordan, Willis McGahee (twice), Sammy Morris, Ronnie Brown, Edgerrin James, Thomas Jones, and Kenny Watson all went over 100 yards against the Browns.

Yes, THAT Sammy Morris and Kenny Watson. Hell, I think Earl Campbell could have suited back up and rushed for a buck-twenty against the Browns (OK...that was evil...but I couldn't help myself).

The most frustrating part was seeing the Browns continually be unable to put people away. Part of it was certainly a tendency to play too cautious on offense with the lead, but the bigger problem was being able to get the ball back to the offense when the game was on the line. No single play epitomized this problem more than the 3rd and 23 for the Oakland Raiders in the fourth quarter that was converted on a FREAKING SCREEN PASS.

The near collapse against completely overmatched offenses for the Jets and Bills games resulted in more acid than a Led Zeppelin concert. Watching the Browns defense often left you quoting Lloyd Bridges' line in "Airplane!".

"Looks like I picked the wrong week to give up sniffing glue."

Strangely, the one area the Browns seemed to excel at on defense was stopping the 3rd and 1 or 4t

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and 1 plays. I have absolutely no explanation for that statistic.

What We Saw

We saw a mess most of the year. Yes, there were decent plays here and there, counting the outstanding (overall) defensive game against the Buffalo Bills, but all in all, this was a unit with very few playmakers, bad schemes, starters who should be backups, and backups that should be driving UPS trucks.

Mid-way through the year, "defensive

guru" Romeo Crennel had seen enough, and started taking a more active involvement in the defense, but it was too little too late. In the end, Phil Savage decided that he had seen enough, and defensive coordinator Todd Grantham was fired on Friday.

In 2008, let's just hope that new defensive coordinator Mel Tucker can bring a spark to the Browns defense, just like new offensive coordinator Rod Chudzinski brought to the offense.

The first thing he needs to work on is tackling skills, as this team was as bad in the fundamentals of tackling as anything

I've ever seen from them.

2007 Defensive Line

It is a given that in a 3-4 defense, you won't see many stars on the defensive line. The players on the line don't get the glory, as they are just supposed to tie up blockers to free up the linebackers to make the plays.

The 2007 defensive line couldn't tie up a tennis shoe.

They were old, slow, too fat or too small, often out of position, and continually blown off the ball. Worst of the group early on was Ted Washington, a man with so much mass that he bends the light around him. How something almost 400 pounds could be moved so easily is beyond me...maybe he had those little roller skate thingies installed on his cleats. After all, my refrigerator is over 400 pounds, and I can move it with somewhat relative ease around the kitchen thanks to those wheels.

Ted was supposed to be on the field a lot less in 2007 after Phil signed Shaun Smith, a backup DT on the Bengals lineup, as a free agent. Shaun was

supposed to take 50% or more of the snaps at nose tackle, but early injuries to Orpheus Roye forced the Browns to play Shaun mostly at the left defensive end position. Once Fat Ted went down with "an injury", the brunt of the NT duty fell to Ethan Kelley. At 6'2" and 320 pounds, that may not be too bad of size for a NT, but that's only if there is some athleticism to go with the size. There wasn't. To make matters worse, Kelley's late season injury led to a major shuffling on the line which led to the likes of Simon Fraser and Bobby Hamilton (also over 35) getting significant playing time.

Orpheus Roye is smaller than

Washington only in the same way that Saturn is smaller than Jupiter, and is younger than Washington only in the same way that Marv Levy is younger than Methuselah. However, in being slow while on the field, and often off the field due to injuries, they were about equal. Shaun Smith didn't completely suck as Roye's replacement, but he didn't exactly light the world on fire, either.

The only bright spot on the defensive line was the play of Robaire Smith. At 6'4" and 315 pounds, he was often the disruptive force that Savage hoped he would be when he signed him as a free agent from the Titans, and his four

sacks were the most for a defensive lineman

Unfortunately, teams could often game plan for Robaire, putting two people on him on rushing plays, as pretty much any 175 pound wide receiver was capable of taking Kamerion Wimbley out on runs.

2008 Defensive Line

There is not a single unit on the Browns that needs to be dismantled as much as the d-line.

Robaire Smith should obviously return. So should Shaun Smith, as the 26 year old has shown that he has potential as a starting NT, and if nothing else, would provide good depth.

Depth is something that wasn't seen the entire year, especially in games when the Browns would only dress five linemen, and then see two of them leave the game with injuries.

Ted Washington is finished. Of that, there is no doubt.

Orpheus Roye should join him. Expect retirement home costs to double once these two are hitting the chow line prior to an evening of "Matlock".

Neither Simon Fraser nor Ethan Kelley should be on the roster next year, although I get the feeling they won't find enough quality replacements to allow Kelley to make his next home in Edmonton, where he belongs.

Chase Pittman and Melila Purcell

were 2007 draft picks that spent the year on the practice squad, and it's doubtful that they'll be part of the plans for 2008.

So that leaves free agency and the draft.

As far as free agents go, forget right now about getting Albert Haynesworth...it's just not going to happen. First of all, he'll probably get franchised by the Titans. If not, he is not going to want to go to a team with a 3-4 defense, and subject his ego to

being a human blocking dummy.

Jared Allen of the Chiefs would be a great addition, but I think he'll also look derisively at the prospect of playing in a 3-4.

Getting Justin Smith from the Bengals would be a great pickup, helping the Browns while hurting a division rival. But Justin is a perfect size for a 4-3 defensive end, but 275 pounds is too light for the 3-4.

Michael Rucker from the Panthers may be the most ideal candidate to help out the Browns DL problems, and may be the most available player from the "big name" list.

Given all of that, Phil needs to be hoping some quality and depth becomes available in the salary cap cuts to come. I know there have been tons of Internet Rumors about former Akron Zip Jason Taylor maybe wanting to escape the Dolphins and come back to the Cleveland area...but again, don't bet on seeing an undersized DE who has spent a

lifetime in the 4-3 to come to a team running the 3-4.

As I stated earlier in the year, I would love to see the Browns scrap the 3-4 and go with the 4-3, with Wimbley being the anchor at RDE. Unfortunately, that's just not going to happen as Romeo Crennel is more likely to be making commercials next year for NutriSystem than to switch away from his pet defensive alignment.

I definitely look for the Browns to add

a defensive lineman with their first pick in the 2008 draft, which will be #53 overall in the second round after the trade to Dallas for the rights to Brady Quinn. If the Browns could somehow get back into the first round of the draft, picking at least #20, they might have a chance at 6'8", 280 lb monster rusher Calais Campbell from Miami, 6'5", 285 lb Kentwan Balmer from North Carolina, or 6'5", 320 pound Frank Okam from Texas

If Phil can't get back into the first round, names you'll be hearing are

Andre Fluellen from FSU or Demario Pressley from NC State. Red Bryant, a 6'5" 330 pound mauler from Texas Tech, could be the Nose Tackle they've needed since the start of the Crennel Regime.

2007 Linebackers

This unit wasn't much better than the defensive linemen, giving the Browns a defensive front seven that may not have scared Notre Dame.

Kamerion Wimbley, was the man that I said was destined for a breakout year. What came instead was the dreaded "sophomore slump". It seems that Wimbley ended up relying upon only one move as a pass rusher, getting his entire body down at limbo dancing level and trying to outrun the left tackle to the QB. This was quickly figured out by most of the NFL, and tackles consistently just pushed Wimbley on upfield and out of the play. It didn't help that Kam was the only real threat for a pass rush, and usually had more men watching out for him than what Michael Moore receives when getting with five miles of George Bush.

One of the worst images that came out of 2007 was seeing Willie McGinnest completely losing his jock while flailing away hopelessly as Ben Toothlessburger must have looked like Reggie Bush to Willie, as he didn't come close to touching the Theodore Chipmunk look-alike at a crucial point late in the game.

McGinnest wasn't the worst linebacker on the team (which is quite an indictment against the rest), as he did have some moments, and his contributions as a leader could not be denied. But Bill Belichick is a great

leader, but that doesn't mean I want to see him out on pass coverage against Wes Welker.

The two inside linebackers were almost worthless. The only "stat" Andra Davis and D'Qwell Jackson might have led in were assisted tackles 10 yards downfield.

Davis has all the heart you could ask from a player, but it's just not enough. The saddest example of his skills and his deficiencies was his greatest

game as a pro, the Snow Bowl against Buffalo. With the treacherous field conditions completely neutralizing speed, Davis was able to practically live in the Buffalo backfield, as he was able to recognize plays, see the holes in the line, and make a move to disrupt the play.

Sadly, when the field is not under six inches of snow, Davis' lack of speed is devastating. He may know where to go, but he can't get there quickly enough to make a difference.

With Jackson, not only is he slow, he is too small for a starting inside linebacker in the NFL. Now being undersized isn't the end of the world, as Ray Lewis isn't but an inch taller than NyQuill, but he was 15 pounds heavier and a hell of a lot faster in his heyday.

The Browns actually have some decent linebacking depth. Antwaan Peek had a good year, starting several games at LOLB when McGinnest was hurt, and racking up 4 sacks. The lack of production from the LDE position possibly hurt him as

well.

Leon Williams got a lot of work this year at inside linebacker, and may end up being good enough to replace Davis or Jackson. He is much better physically, but he doesn't seem to have the instincts yet needed to be a playmaker at the inside. And his pass coverage skills are only slightly better than mine, as he was constantly torched by any tight end that was lucky enough to go up against him.

2008 Linebackers

In my perfect world, the Browns end up replacing both Davis and Jackson as starters in 2008.

Assuming the 3-4 remains, it would be great if the light went on for Leon Williams, and his playing level caught up to his potential. He is big and fast, and if one could combine his physicality with Davis' brain, you'd have one helluva inside

linebacker.

Free agency will not be much of a help in the middle, as the only decent UFA is Mark Simoneau from the Saints, and I'm not sure how much of an upgrade that would truly be. So any additions would have to come from the draft. Guess again, as the draft really doesn't look good for an ILB in the second round, but names to watch for in the third round would include Vince Hall from Va Tech, J Lehman from Illinois, or Ben Moffitt from South

Florida.

For any of you thinking that it would be great if James Laurinitis could end up with the Browns, please put down the crack pipe.

At outside linebacker, the Browns are in pretty good shape with Wimbley and Peek...although Wimbley really needs to develop some more moves to be able to step up to Shawn Merriman level of

play.

But even though the Browns are better at OLB than the other front seven positions, that's not to say that Phil Savage might try to make a huge splash in free agency by going after Lance Briggs from Chicago or Terrelle Suggs from the hated Ratbirds. Karlos Dansby from the Cardinals may be the sleeper of this year's free agency crop, and don't be surprised if he's approached by Phil.

Derek Anderson for Lance Briggs? That's a hell of a nice fantasy. So is me spending a night with Scarlett Johannson...and the odds of either happening are probably pretty close to each other.

2007 Defensive Backs

Any analysis of the play of the defensive backs in 2007 has to be graded on a curve, as it's nearly impossible for ANYONE to

cover a receiver for 30 seconds, as that's the amount of time most opposing quarterbacks had on 90% of their plays this year.

That said, the DBs were the class of the Browns defense in 2007. Mel Tucker once again got great performances from his charges, and did a fantastic job in keeping things afloat once the injuries started adding up. Tucker's promotion to Defensive Coordinator was well earned, and

should pay dividends in 2008.

For 2007, the biggest story was the immediate impact seen from rookie second round draft pick Eric Wright. Thrust immediately into the starting lineup, Wright showed his talent right away, and his performance was one of the most pleasant surprises of the year. Like any other rookie, he was picked on early and often, and as with any CB, that meant he sometimes got burned.

But he also had some incredible plays and games, including shutting Randy Moss down during the game against the Patriots. And in The Year of Craptastic Tackling, Wright was the one player who could always be counted on to bring down anyone he got near.

The injury to Eric in mid-year was a big blow both to his development, and to the Browns...but on the positive side,

it allowed a little known fourth round draft pick named Brandon McDonald to have his coming out party locking down Houston star Andre Johnson when the Browns beat the Texans.

For the man considered the best defensive back, Leigh Bodden had an up and down year. He was often burned and did not tackle well, but he came up with some of the biggest plays of the year with his ball-hawking skills.

In fairness, Bodden was hampered all year with a nagging ankle injury, and gamely played through it, as the alternative, at least while Wright was out, would have been to put Daven Holly out there...and given the pass rush, that could have been uglier than Amy Winehouse on a bender.

The safety play probably took a step backward from 2006 to 2007, as the Browns chose not to resign Brian Russell, the

emotional leader of the defensive backs, instead going with younger Brodney Pool, which was certainly an athletic improvement, but one that caused early problems as Pool is a natural strong safety who struggled adjusting to free safety.

However, Pool did make improvements as the year went along, highlighted by his 100 yard return of an interception for a

touchdown against the Ratbirds.

Sean Jones also had a slow start to the year, proving to be almost as worthless in pass coverage as Leon Williams, and too often early in the season falling victim to the temptation to try for the BIG HIT rather than just making the tackle, often resulting in a ball carrier bouncing off from him, and running for an additional ten yards.

But even more than Pool, Jones seemed to respond to the attitude change of the defense once Romeo got more involved, and by the end of the year, he was playing arguably Pro-Bowl level football.

2008 Defensive Backs

Fully expect the same four starters next year as this year,

barring injuries. This is the strongest unit for the Browns defense...and is also the youngest. If the Browns develop an actual pass rush next season, this could be as good of a unit as was seen in the days of Dixon and Minnifield.

The biggest change will be in dealing with whomever is hired to replace Mel Tucker as

defensive backs coach, although I can't see that being a big transition, as you know Mel will still have a huge influence on the backfield's play.

The most important thing will be keeping Leigh Bodden healthy in 2008. In 2006, he was looking like a future Pro-Bowler, and the best lock-down corner the Browns had seen since their return. But due to injuries,

2007 wasn't nearly as good for him. With luck, Bodden will be able to improve upon his breakout 2006 year.

Eric Wright also needs to continue through his learning curve. As noted, he has been a pleasant surprise, a young man seemingly bound and determined to show that the mistakes he made as a teenager are past him.

McDonald should certainly assume the role as the nickelback, and Romeo should rest easy knowing he has some quality depth, with Brandon being able to step into a starting role at a moment's notice.

Jones will hopefully grow from his struggles early this last season as well. Perhaps his head got a bit swollen after

several writers (Dr. Z from Sports Illustrated amongst them), pegged him as an All-Pro during the preseason.

Brodney Pool is easily the weakest link of the defensive backfield. If he is to make it on this team, he needs to learn how to cover, as that's something that's just a tiny bit important for the freakin' free safety to do. He also needs to

improve his tackling skill as well.

Phil will certainly be looking at improving depth. It would be great if part of that could come from Gary Baxter making a comeback from two patella tendon tears to help out at safety.

Marcus Trufant and Asante Samuel are the only two big name defensive backs available in free agency, but I don't see Phil even thinking about using any cap money on defensive backs with such glaring holes in the front seven.

Look for some fill in on depth off the second level free agent DBs, and possibly some salary

cap cuts.

One thing I would really like to see change statistically for the Browns next year is that there is no way...noooo wwaaaayyyyyyy (channeling Jackie Gleason as Sheriff Bufford T. Justice) that the second, third, and fifth leading tacklers on your defense should be a strong safety and two of your cornerbacks.

1. Jackson: 101

2. Jones: 96

3. Bodden: 88

4. Williams: 85

5. Wright: 76

In-excusable. Especially when half of Jackson's tackles seem to come in the defensive backfield.

The canning of Grantham, and the IMMEDIATE naming of Tucker as his replacement are the best pieces of news

possible at this point for the defense.

The next steps are up to Phil.

Randy's checkbook is open...go spend some money.

Next column...Special Team, Coaching Staff, and Front

Office.