Two a days start in a little over a week, and as we head into camp, Nick Allburn is going to take a detailed position by position look at the 2008 Browns for us. He starts with the offensive line, a team weakness for what seemed like decades heading into last season. Enter Eric Steinbach and Joe Thomas, two Pro Bowl caliber linemen on the left side, and the unit emerged into one of football's finest. Nick takes a closer look at the men up front for the orange and brown in his latest.

A year ago the Cavaliers were coming off the most successful season in franchise history, while the Indians were on the way to their first postseason appearance since 2001. What a difference a year makes.

As we sit here in mid-July, the Tribe occupies the Central Division's cellar, and the Cavs are haunted by their inability to (thus far) find LeBron James a suitable running mate. For the first time in a long time, the Browns serve as the light at the end of the tunnel, and a fan base yearning for a winner hope that the Browns can use their surprisingly strong 2007 campaign as a stepping stone to even bigger things in 2008.

Over the next several weeks leading up to the season's kickoff, we'll be dissecting the Browns and projecting the strengths and weaknesses of the team's various positions. Considering that the offensive line was unquestionably the team's strongest position last season, it seems as logical a place as any to begin.

Author's note: Feel free to crank this jam while reading this. I played it on a loop while writing this.

Projected Starters

Left Tackle: Joe Thomas
Left Guard: Eric Steinbach
Center: Hank Fraley
Right Guard: Ryan Tucker / Rex Hadnot
Right Tackle: Kevin Shaffer

Key Reserves: Lennie "Don't Call Me Milton" Friedman, Seth McKinney, Ryan Tucker/Rex Hadnot

Glancing back...

The transformation of the offensive line between the 2006 and 2007 seasons was nothing short of remarkable. In eight seasons since they returned to the NFL, the Browns had difficulty fielding even an average blocking unit in spite of signing several big ticket free agents. For only the second time in the team's last 12 drafts, GM Phil Savage invested a first round pick in an offensive lineman when he selected Wisconsin's Joe Thomas third overall. Savage augmented the addition of Thomas with a premier free agent, Eric Steinbach.

Thomas' addition moved Kevin Shaffer -- coming off of a disappointing 2006 -- to right tackle, where he flourished. Seth McKinney was signed to play right guard, and center Hank Fraley was re-signed to round out the group as the only true hold over from 2006. Even while being routed 34-7 by Pittsburgh in the season opener, the line's improvement was palpable.

Although the Steelers collected six sacks in that contest, we noted here that the line was not the true culprit. Charlie Frye and his sticky fingers were behind five of those six sacks, and although it was an ugly loss, the line had given us a glimpse (even if we had to look extra hard) of the potential that they would realize during the remaining 15 games.

Behind the stellar left side tandem of Joe Thomas and Eric Steinbach the line performed at a high level much sooner than anyone anticipated. When Ryan Tucker returned from his four-game suspension for taking that stuff Jose Canseco used, he began to phase out Seth McKinney as the starting right guard, and that's when the blocking unit really gelled. Jamal Lewis averaged 112.7 yards on the ground over the last final 7 games; a good indicator of how the line's performance

really spiked during the season's second half.

The performance of a team's skill players is often a fairly direct correlation of the quality of their offensive line, so let's inspect the performances of the Browns' key skill players in 2007. Quarterback Derek Anderson threw for 3787 yards and 29 touchdowns, good for 9th and 5th in the league, respectively. Featured back Jamal Lewis bulldozed for 1304 yards and 9 touchdowns, placing him 5th and 7th (tie), respectively. And star pass catcher Braylon Edwards accumulated 1289 receiving yards and 16 touchdowns, finishing 7th and 2nd, respectively.

My intent is not to spark a chicken/egg debate here, but it's usually fair to say that when a team's offensive line thrives, success tends to follow. Consider how the Browns' offensive output exploded in 2007, following a poor showing in 2006.

Points per game

2006: 14.88
2007: 25.13

Passing yards per game / yards per attempt

2006: 181.13 / 5.66
2007: 232.88 / 6.84

Passing TDs / INTs

2006: 15 / 25
2007: 29 / 20

Rushing yards / yards per carry

2006: 1335 / 3.59
2007: 1895 / 4.31

Rushing TDs

2006: 7
2007: 13

Obviously, the offensive line wasn't the only variable in play. For instance, the hiring of Rob Chudzinski as the OC, the acquisition of Jamal Lewis, the installation and development of Derek Anderson as the starter, and the continued evolution of receivers Braylon Edwards and Kellen Winslow; these were all critical factors in the growth of the offense. That said, it's a pretty safe bet that without the offensive line's unexpected quantum leap, many of the skill players wouldn't have posted such gaudy numbers, and the offense itself would have been no better than average.

Looking forward...

Aside from trotting out two true studs in Steinbach and Thomas, what I love about the state of the line is its depth. Of course, losing LeCharles Bentley was unfortunate. The Browns probably could have made LeChuck feel more welcome, but the bottom line was that Bentley wanted to get paid, and you can't blame him for that. (Insert obligatory "it's a business" cliché here.)

But even without the local boy, the Browns still have excellent depth up front. The Rex Hadnot signing didn't get loads of attention because of the trades for Corey Williams and Shaun Rogers, the Donté Stallworth deal, and the re-signing of Derek Anderson. However, the addition of Hadnot gives the Browns a young (age 26) interior player who can play either guard or center.

Ryan Tucker had hip surgery in May and it is probably unrealistic to expect him to be ready to roll when training camp begins, which would presumably leave Hadnot as the starting right guard. Assuming Tucker makes a full recovery from his surgery, he'll provide excellent depth on the right side of the line if he's unable to crack the starting five. And if Tucker reclaims his starting role, then Hadnot will serve as the number one backup.

Seth McKinney, who, like Hadnot, has experience at guard and center, is also a very capable reserve. Fans won't lose any sleep if injuries force McKinney back into a starting role. Lennie Friedman could start in a pinch at center or guard (preferably guard), but he would definitely be the line's weakest link. Cliff Louis, a 2007undrafted free agent from Morgan State, is being chatted up as a possible backup tackle, but if the Browns get down to their fourth lineman off the bench then they'll be in serious trouble.

That's one thing that we can't forget: the Browns were lucky to avoid a cataclysmic

loss on the line last season (e.g. LeCharles Bentley, Ross Verba, Bob Hallen going AWOL). While the team does now have the depth to absorb a major injury, it would still be awfully difficult to weather the loss of either Joe Thomas or Eric Steinbach, around whom the line has been constructed.

Barring such an unforeseen disaster, there's little reason to believe that the line can't perform as well or better than they did last season, when they elevated their play to become one of the premier blocking units in the league. It's a luxury that the Browns have not had coon's age, but they presently sport not merely a good offensive line, but a **great** one.

Such a sturdy foundation gives the Browns some serious insurance on offense. If Derek Anderson were to suffer a serious injury, Brady Quinn, even if markedly worse than Anderson, would probably still be successful because he would have such good protection. If Jamal Lewis were sidelined, then Jason Wright and Jerome Harrison could run through the gaping holes that the line was previously opening for J-Lew. That isn't to say that the skill players aren't extremely important, but if quality blocking still exists, even the backups can be successful.

Joe Thomas was not the trendy draft pick in 2007. When Phil Savage inked Rex Hadnot, few fans batted an eye. Hank Fraley isn't dating Jessica Simpson. And for Hank's sake, thank God. She might be hot, but wouldn't you have to talk to that blathering idiot eventually? No thanks. These guys are not on Dancing with the Stars. The closest you'll see to that is Emmy contender Josh's Cribbs, season two. But come September 7th , these guys will be plowing the roads for Jamal Lewis and nullifying the pass rush for Derek Anderson, and they're the biggest reason why the Browns are primed to make a run at the AFC North title this season.