The melancholy drama playing out in Green Bay between Brett Favre and Packers management is a painful reminder that at its core, professional sports is far more about the business than the game. One doesn't survive without the other, but never forget, as Favre certainly won't now, that when business imperatives crash head on with personal issues, the business will win every time. In his latest, Gary hits on the Favre soap opera and draws some parallels to Bernie Kosar's banishment from the Browns.

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Each day may bring a new wrinkle or two in the on-going Favre saga, but its essential elements are as old as the business, indeed any business: an aging, once productive player who still feels he can contribute vs. a business that must constantly replenish its talent to survive in the long-term.

You can compile a list where this same scenario has played out in any city. Because it's Favre and because he's a quarterback, football fans can quickly tick off Joe Montana's two-year run of sorts with the Kansas City Chiefs, the year Johnny Unitas spent in San Diego and even Joe Namath's lost year with the Los Angeles Rams as the most obvious examples.

There have been plenty of examples right here in Cleveland. Bill Belichick's mid-season banishment of Bernie Kosar comes immediately to mind, although fans on both sides of that debate are still arguing whether it was truly a case of diminished skills or the clash of two head-strong personalities. It's far from the only example. On the other side of it, the Browns seem intent on wringing out whatever might be left in Willie McGinest's reservoir. In baseball, the Indians tried the same thing with both Steve Carlton and Phil Niekro, two distinguished pitchers who desperately tried to hang on longer than was probably advisable. Arguably, even the Indians' refusal to resign Omar Vizquel falls into this category.

As much as every situation is different, each also is very much the same: a high profile, Hall of Fame-type player unable to know when to say when and a front office wrestling with a potential public relations disaster. The Baltimore Colts could no more relish the though of turning their back on Johnny U as could the Packers turning away Favre. Each also involves a heavy dose of emotion emanating from every corner.

And, as usual, fans are caught in the middle. Almost universally, they'll support the player. Fans are far more interested in watching their favorites long past their primes than in retiring too soon. Jim Brown and Barry Sanders may set the standard for retiring on top, but they are as much criticized by parochial interests for retiring too soon.

Packer fans are predictably distraught. The thought of Favre not playing again is as distasteful to them as the thought that he could end up with one of their rivals. That's why you hear the argument that the Packers are making a colossal mistake in seemingly not allowing Favre to return because by any measure, Favre is a better quarterback than Aaron Rogers. It's an emotional argument, but it's also incomplete because Rogers really hasn't had any opportunity to establish himself and Favre is a Hall of Famer. It's also an argument that looks back without any appreciation of what is to come.

The better question, but not necessarily the best question, is one that asks which

quarterback gives the team the best chance to win the next game on the schedule. Even then, this doesn't entirely resolve the matter because so much depends on the time frame. In other words, Favre may give the Packers the best chance to win the first game of the season, but is that true for the eighth game of the season? What about the 12th?

Favre may have proven to be the football equivalent of Bruce Willis' character in "Unbreakable" thus far, but sooner or later the statistics will catch up with him. He will get hurt. If the Packers miss the opportunity in the interim to develop Rogers, a quarterback in whom they also have much invested their chance of winning later drops measurably.

That's really the right question, isn't it? What's best overall for the franchise? Even fans complaining about the perceived unfair treatment of a multi-millionaire would concede that their loyalties ultimately run to the franchise first, the players second. If Favre ends up with the Minnesota Vikings, some fans may buy a purple Favre jersey out of spite, but I can pretty much guarantee you that in two years the Goodwill bins in and around Milwaukee would be filled with those same jerseys.

Unfortunately, defining "overall" is a nearly impossible task, one that makes you appreciate how difficult the job of general manager really can be at times. It's like the economy; everyone has an opinion on it. Making it even more difficult is the fact that with Favre, just as in most cases like it, the professionals can't even agree. Certainly if the Packers ultimately release Favre, someone will pick him up, which is at least some validation that Favre can still play in the league. Just as Kosar played some meaningful games for the Cowboys immediately

after Belichick booted him from Cleveland, Favre will certainly do something heroic for another team.

That seems to be the real fear of Packers management and it shouldn't be. Favre may contribute for awhile with another team, but it won't be for too long. Packers management should take great comfort in the lessons of Montana, Namath and Unitas. Even Belichick wasn't too far off base when it came to Kosar. Each of these situations should provide as much proof as Packers management really needs that their long-term assessment on Favre isn't wrong. There may be some gas left in Favre's tank, but that tank is hardly full.

The Favre case really is a pretty easy one from a distance. Packers management may be exhausted by the yearly ritual of his indecision and are using it against him now to extract a bit of revenge but they should just let it go. If Favre's a distraction it's because Packers management has let it become a distraction. What they know in their hearts should guide their actions: Far worse than letting Favre go too soon is hanging on to him too long.