Just as he did last season, Gary Benz is going to crank out two Browns columns for us every week. An instant reaction piece that we will post right after the games end. And a "Lingering Items" piece mid-week after Gary's had a chance to go back, review the game tape, and really analyze what happened. This morning, Gary looks back on the Jets game, giving us his thoughts on some of the positives and negatives that came out of that first contest.

It you're going to write a game story during the NFL preseason, good luck. The problem with most preseason games is that they lack one and sometimes both critical elements: a game and a story. If you stuck around for the bitter end of the Cleveland Browns' "game" against the New York Jets on Thursday night, you understand perfectly my point.

There's really no reason to get into the whole "isn't the NFL ripping off its fans by charging them full price for preseason games?" rant. The answer is a resounding "of course." For season ticket holders, just amortize the additional price you pay for the two extra "games" over the cost of the other eight, meaning that the face value of each of your season tickets really is understated by about 25%. Think of it as a hidden tax, the kind politicians who like to take "no new taxes pledges" tend to impose. For the casual fan who actually buys a preseason ticket just to witness the excitement in person, he or she hardly in the best position to complain about the price afterward.

Moving beyond the cost issue, the bigger problem with preseason games is that they are a misnomer. Sure, there are time clocks, referees, kick offs, and punt returns. The vendors sell beer, too. But these are just false positives. Any

resemblance between the preseason and a regular season game is mostly imagined.

Thursday's game against the Jets was instructive mostly to prove that overall point. Quarterback Derek Anderson played one series. Kellen Winslow, Jr., sat out the game as he probably will most of the preseason. The same pretty much goes for nearly all of the starters. For their part, the Jets started a quarterback who, the minute Brett Favre passed his conditioning test, immediately was relegated to back-up, again.

Look around the NFL and the same thing played out in virtually every other preseason "game". The starters played token minutes in a modest nod of sorts to the saps who attended in person. New England Patriots' head coach, Bill Belichick, the ultimate fan coach, doesn't even bother to nod. Tom Brady might as well be in the witness protection program during the preseason. Belichick, like every other NFL head coach, including the Browns' Romeo Crennel, uses these preseason walk-throughs for the time-honored task of evaluating the group of marginal talents fighting for the last 10 or 12 spots on the rosters, under so-called game conditions. It's the only reason, I think, they even bother with a clock.

But a clock does not a game make. The first person who saw anything approaching game conditions after the first 10 minutes on Thursday during the Browns/Jets "game" is either the widest-eyed optimist on the planet or the most delusional. It's a fine line. What you did see is each team's second and third strings taking on the other team's second and third strings. This may tell Crennel something about the depth of his team relative to that of the 4-12 Jets, but it wildly undershoots the intended goal, except maybe when it comes to the Browns' secondary.

Going into this season, there isn't a fan around who doesn't already know that the secondary on this team is thinner than the ice John Edwards is skating on these days. The first of many expected cracks in that ice came Thursday night when

quarterback Brett Ratliff, the Jets' presumptive third-string quarterback, completed touchdowns of 70 and 71 yards.

Crennel, offered maybe some unintentional foreshadowing when he said on Saturday, "giving up two plays of 70 yards is never acceptable, But it was just two plays, and you can't make a general assumption based on two plays. Now, if it happens again, then it will cause for concern." Apparently general manager Phil Savage was even less impressed or already fraught with concern having witnessed the sight of his defensive backfield being burned by David Clowney, a second-year receiver of such little note that the only entry on his New York Jets biography page under "career highlights" is "inactive for three games." I kid you not. On Sunday, Savage signed two more defensive backs, former Buckeye Brandon Mitchell and former Minnesota Viking Travis Key. What, you were expecting Champ Bailey?

Mitchell and Key are just stop gap measures. Undoubtedly Savage is trying to work some kind of trade or at least hoping that an upgrade awaits him on the scrap heap of other team's cuts. In the meantime, look for more big plays being given up on defense this preseason as the starting defensive backfield gets plenty of rest this preseason. Crennel may not be concerned just yet, but he probably understands that the health of those starters is far more important to this team's chances of getting to the playoffs than Anderson's.

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Early the next morning after the Browns/Jets game (which came much earlier than I would have liked as a result of the weather delay during the first quarter), I flew to New York for the weekend. If you think Brett Favre being traded to the Jets was big news in the big city last Wednesday, it was nothing compared to what transpired the minute the Jets returned home on Friday.

The media was far more obsessed with every move Favre made than such

pedestrian matters as, say, the Olympics. There was Mayor Michael Bloomberg, for example, treating Favre like visiting royalty at City Hall. Jets' owner Woody Johnson understating it just a tad likened the attention to an Elvis sighting. It was all great fun and surely helped the team sell some Favre jerseys.

At some point, though, the Jets will have to wake up to the notion that the key to their season rests not so much Favre as it is does on the hope that the rest of the team that general manager Mike Tannebaum rebuilt after last season's disaster comes through. If Favre looks good this season, it will owe mostly to what is most likely to be a greatly improved offensive line highlighted by the signing of former Pittsburgh Steelers' mainstay, Alan Faneca.

As Browns' fans can readily attest to, nothing changes the character of a moribund offense like a vastly improved offensive line. As much as things have changed about football, the basics are still the same. The team that controls the line of scrimmage controls the game. The Browns' Anderson may have been the NFL's breakout player of the year last year, but he would not have come close to having that kind of season without the additions of first round pick Joe Thomas and free agent Eric Steinbach. The Jets need a similar story this year. Put it this way: given the state of the Jets last season, if Anderson had been their quarterback, Tannebaum still would have traded for Favre.

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An amusing debate making the rounds right now is whether quarterback Brady Quinn has turned into a dinker and a dunker, afraid of throwing downfield. Thursday's performance helped fuel that debate. What makes it amusing is not its underlying accuracy but the fact that the debate is taking place at all. Quinn is, after all, a second string quarterback with limited opportunities to impress. If taking advantage of those limited opportunities is the goal, far better, I think, to actually move the team with a more efficient attack than to constantly throw downfield to second and third string receivers on a team that's thin at the receiver position in the first place.

The real subtext of the discussion is that a supposedly new-found fondness for short passes is the reason Quinn isn't starting ahead of Anderson. If that helps someone come to some sort of personal resolution over their otherwise mixed feelings on Anderson, so be it. But the reality is that Quinn isn't starting because Anderson had one of the great seasons of any Browns quarterback and deserves to enter camp without a single question mark hanging over him. It's a status that isn't going to change until Anderson is either hurt or demonstrates unquestionably that last season was a fluke. That's not a bad thing.

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Here's the first question you might want to ponder as you wait several more days until the next preseason farce: if Syndric Steptoe had been playing for the Jets on Thursday instead of David Clowney, would Savage have found it necessary to sign Brandon Mitchell or Travis Key?