To a young, confident, and most of all talented Browns team, the 2008 schedule, studded with prime-time showdowns, short work weeks, and back-to-back road swings, isn't as much an obstacle as it is a challenge, one that can be broken down into six distinct schedules-within-the-schedule. Winning these mini-schedules, or at any rate holding serve, will be the key to success this season. Jesse Lamovsky doubts we'll see any long winning streaks, not against this schedule; avoiding losing streaks will be the name of the game. Not so much thriving but surviving. Let's take a look.

As formidable as Cleveland's schedule looks in 2008 - the general consensus seems to be that it's the NFL's second-toughest going in, just behind Pittsburgh's - it probably won't be the most difficult schedule the Browns face in this decade. In 2000, Cleveland had to play Tennessee (13-3) twice, Baltimore (12-4) twice, Oakland (12-4), the Giants (12-4), Denver (11-5) and Philadelphia (11-5). Between them, these teams accounted for six of the league's twelve playoff berths, three of the four conference championship game berths, both Super Bowl contestants, and eight wins over the Browns by an average score of 30-8, with no defeats. For a second-year expansion team that boasted the likes of Travis Prentice, Steve Zahursky, Stalin Colinet and Percy Ellsworth as starters, this schedule was almost unfair.

Times have changed. To a young, confident, and most of all talented Browns team, the 2008 slate, studded with prime-time showdowns, short work weeks, and back-to-back road swings, isn't as much an obstacle as it is a challenge, one that can be broken down into six distinct schedules-within-the-schedule. Winning these mini-schedules, or at any rate holding serve, will be the key to success this

season. I frankly doubt we'll see any long winning streaks, not against this schedule; avoiding losing streaks will be the name of the game. Not so much thriving but surviving. Let's take a look.

Games 1 and 2: Setting the tone

Sun, Sept 7: Dallas (4:15 pm)

Sun, Sept 14: Pittsburgh (8:15 pm)

The Dallas game would be a great one to win. It's the opener, it's at home, nationally-telecasted, and obviously, you want to rub Dallas's nose in the mud every chance you get, because, well, it's Dallas. It would also be nice to improve our record in home openers to a rootin' tootin' 2-8 since '99. It's a prestige game, as much as any on the schedule. But the Browns can survive a loss out of conference to what will be the odds-on favorite to represent the NFC in the Super Bowl. We'll get another crack at them in February anyway. Right? Right?

Besides, I don't have a good feeling about the opener. Something tells me Dallas is going take a blowtorch to our callow secondary.

Pittsburgh is a different story. The Browns haven't beaten the Steelers at all since 2003, haven't beaten them at home since 2000, and haven't finished ahead of them in the standings since 1989. No opponent since the rebirth has dealt Cleveland more disaster and degradation than the Steelers, especially at CBS, and it isn't even close. There is a lot of expiation to be done, and it has to start right here, right now, early in the season, at home, in prime-time, with the nation watching.

I'm thinking: 1-1, with the win over Pittsburgh.

Games 3 and 4: Opportunity

Sun, Sept 21: @ Baltimore (4:15 pm)

Sun, Sept 28: @ Cincinnati (1:00 pm)

"Opportunity" cuts several ways. Depending on how the first two games go, the Browns could utilize this stretch to solidify their place among the contenders, *or* extricate themselves from an early hole, *or* keep their heads above water, *or* drown altogether. Baltimore is in a rudimentary situation offensively, and it's gotten to the point with the Bengals where you almost have to assume dysfunction, but make no mistake- this will be an arduous pair of games. Getting both of them would be beautiful. Getting one is absolutely mandatory.

I'm thinking: 1-1, one way or another

Record: 2-2, 2-1 in the AFC, 2-1 in the division

BYE WEEK

Game 5: Statement

Mon, Oct 13: N.Y. Giants (8:30 pm)

Coming off the bye week, the Browns should be- barring catastrophe- reasonably healthy going into this prime-time match-up with the defending World Champions. If everything goes reasonably well in the first four, this will be Cleveland's opportunity to convince the football world of its bona-fides beyond the shadow of a doubt and to fortify the won-loss record in advance of what figures to be a mulish pair of road games the next two weeks. The Browns haven't won on Monday Night since they beat the 49ers in the second week of the 1993 season. That's entirely too long.

I'm thinking: A win, of course, the more convincing, the better. Style points, baby, style points.

Record: 3-2, 2-1 in the AFC, 2-1 in the division

Games 6 and 7: Gauntlet

Sun, Oct 20: @ Washington (4:15 pm)

Sun, Oct 27: @ Jacksonville (4:05 pm)

It's always difficult to go on the road after a Monday Night game, with the short week- or, at least it has been for the Browns, who have an all-time record of 3-9 on the road the week after Monday Night home games. With a rookie head coach and Jason Campbell going into his pivotal third season, the Redskins are an even bigger cipher than most teams- which is saying something- but they'll have an extra day of rest and are at home for the second week in a row. It won't get any easier in Jacksonville, although there should be a substantial quantity of Browns fans in Alltel Stadium amongst the lukewarm Jaguars faithful.

I'm thinking: 1-1, with the win over Washington. Expecting to beat Jack Del Rio's brawny crew in their house seems a little greedy.

Record: 4-3, 2-2 in the AFC, 2-1 in the division

Games 8 through 12: Getting healthy

Sun, Nov 2: Baltimore (1:00 pm)

Thu, Nov 6: Denver (8:15 pm)

Mon, Nov 17: @ Buffalo (8:30 pm)

Sun, Nov 23: Houston, (1:00 pm)

Sun, Nov 30: Indianapolis (1:00 pm)

After a rugged first seven games, four on the road, five against 2007 playoff qualifiers, here is Cleveland's chance to grab some tailwinds for the stretch run. Only one of the five opponents- Indianapolis- made the playoffs in 2007, and the one road game is against an eminently beatable Buffalo team. That's not to say these won't be challenging match-ups, especially the Colts, the youthful Bills, and a Houston team that figures to be highly competitive. The Colts game is the biggest. It's the last game of the home stand, and Indy is a big dog. If you fashion yourself an AFC contender and you've got the Colts late in the season, in the elements, you need to beat them. Besides, it'd be nice to take some satisfaction from the team that fell over with its legs in the air in the Sunday Night finale that kept the Browns out of the playoffs.

I'm thinking: 3-2, with the losses to Buffalo and Houston. I'm kind of feeling the Texans this year. I think they're going to be rugged.

Record: 7-5, 5-4 in the AFC, 3-1 in the division

Games 13 and 14: Gauntlet II

Sun, Dec 7: @ Tennessee (1:00 pm)

Mon, Dec 15: @ Philadelphia (8:30 pm)

Payback from the scheduling gods continues anew, as for the third time the Browns go on the road in back-to-back weeks, this time against a pair of teams that finished in the top ten defensively in 2007. Vince Young still throws a football like he's flinging dog-poop off his hand, but as long as Albert Haynesworth is healthy and relatively sane, Tennessee's defense will keep them in the game against just about anyone. With Philadelphia, it's a question of how healthy they're going to be at this point in the season. The Eagles always seemed to be banged up by December, and their two biggest playmakers- McNabb and Westbrook- have been particularly injury-prone. No matter what, playing in Philadelphia, at night, in the winter, will not be easy. Like the previous two sets of back-to-back road games, it's essential to gain at least a split.

I'm thinking: 1-1, with the victory over Tennessee

Record: 8-6, 6-4 in the AFC, 3-1 in the division

Games 15 and 16: The Decision

Sun, Dec 21: Cincinnati (1:00 pm)

Sun, Dec 28: @ Pittsburgh (1:00 pm)

If everything goes the way I think it'll go, the Browns should enter the final two weeks of the season with an opportunity to make the playoffs and win the division. The way the schedule looks, I don't see anyone running away with the AFC North, so even at 8-6, Cleveland's hat should be firmly in the ring. Of these two games, Cincinnati looks the most important: a chance for the Browns to clinch a winning record overall and in the division. Hopefully, Cleveland already has at least a playoff berth wrapped up when they close the regular season at Pittsburgh.

I'm thinking: 1-1, with the victory over Cincinnati

Record: 9-7, 7-5 in the AFC, 4-2 in the division. With this schedule- three sets of back-to-back road games and match-ups with arguably the two deepest divisions in football- it wouldn't surprise me to see the Browns come through with an inferior record to 2007 and superior numbers in terms of point differential and offensive and defensive rankings- the best measures of a team's worth. I really think Cleveland will be a better, more balanced team than they were last year. But that may not translate into improvement in the won-loss column.

Either way, the days of 3-13 and 4-12 *should* be behind us. For that, we can all be grateful. And you never know- 9-7 must just be good enough to play January football this year.