After being chastised by our readers for his gloomy outlook on the season after the preseason debacle against the Giants, Mansfield Lucas takes no pleasure in the fact he was right about how overmatched the Browns would be against the Cowboys. Mansfield is a Browns fan and a Browns fan first, and having taken in games with this cat, believe me when I tell you no one takes the losses harder. In his latest, Mansfield looks back at Sunday's loss, and says that this Sunday's game against the Appalachians is The Mother of all Gut Checks.

So this is where I get to write "I told you so." And it's no fun. I would have much, much rather had Browns' fans cracking on me calling me too negative than having been dang near dead nuts on target. Fans kill me sometimes. Very few were more optimistic than 9 - 7 in their outlooks, and then they bust out the, "But its pre-season" when the holes are exposed. What you saw Sunday, unfortunately, was real. The holes in the talent are real, the lack of depth is real, and the inability of a GM to finish the job of getting enough talent in whole units to make the playoffs and a head coach to prepare a team for a season after four years has been evident since July. The chickens just came home to roost.

I'm through kicking these cats when they're down. I rang the warning bells yelling "ice berg, dead ahead!" and most thought I was nuts. They wrote me and said I was "overreacting" with takes like this. Now that some of y'all now see what I see; reality, there's lots of angst on the boards. Me? I'm moving on.

The season is one game old and yes, Sunday was a meltdown. The question I say to myself is "what now?" It's pretty hazy. The fundamentals of the offense are still there. All they need is some repetition they didn't get in camp. By

game three of four they should be firing on all cylinders if they are healthy. They are simply too talented to show what they showed on Sunday. I believe that they will kick things into gear.

The defense is just a mess. Where do you even start? What do you do with the lack of depth in the secondary? How do you expect positive change when they are stuck on those islands for five, six, seven seconds? How can there be such an abject lack of edge pass rush in a 3 - 4? How can a team be run on so easily?

Look, Dallas is ***GOOD.*** That offensive line is amazing. Their skilled players are talented and Romo makes good decisions. But wow. Just wow. They chewed up the Browns in long drives and made it look so easy doing so.

You watch games like that and it is hard to buy into the coaching mantra that things are correctable. And yet as puzzling as Phil and RAC's Browns are, I know one thing that has been consistent. Just as you think they've turned the corner - good or bad - they stun you by reverting to the opposite. Just when you get the feeling that Randy Lerner is just gonna lose it and decide that Romeo must die, his players step up for him.
I'm counting on that this week.

The bunch is at an early crossroads. Most casual fans bought in after 10 - 6. People believed the hype and the Kool-Aid ™ mugs were clanging. Sunday against Dallas was a big let-down. They laid an egg at their home opener after stinking up the exhibition season. But that is nothing compared to what's facing them this week. They've lost what, 15 of the last 16 to the rival or something ludicrous like that? RAC and Phil are zero and eight. Hell, there is no "rivalry" except in Browns' fans' minds. We are a joke to the Appalachians. They pity us. And they looked phenomenal against Houston because they have a coach who can prepare them. If RAC and the Browns can find a way for them to rise up and break this streak of shame, all will be forgiven. That's an understatement. RAC could run for mayor if he could beat the Hilljacks. But as sure as I'm writing this, as sure as the sun rises from the direction of Mentor, if the Browns come out and give the same effort they did in the exhibition season and in week one, if they play with the same lack of skill in the same sloppy

way, and they get their heads handed to them as the Inbred have done to them seemingly every other time they play, this city and fan base will turn on this bunch like nothing anyone has ever seen.

I really don't want to see that.

There's no point in breaking down the X's and O's. It's been done to death. Go back and re-read the same articles because they have made no adjustments and fixed nothing. This upcoming game is the Mother of all Gut Checks for the Opie and RAC Era. Their jobs may well be on the line. And the 2008 Stillers don't resemble the 2007 Bengals where the Browns faced similar circumstances and created a stunning 10 - 5 turnaround after a much worse opener. The task will be greater, more Herculean.

We're gonna find out a whole lot by Monday morning.