It was easy to have high expectations for this Browns team this season. Ten wins a year ago, a young dynamic offense, and a series of upgrades to the defensive line that was so bad last season. In the wake of Sunday's loss, Erik Cassano is far from meltdown mode. He just says it's time for a little perspective. Dallas could (maybe should) be holding the Vince Lombardi Trophy aloft in February. The Browns are, at the very best, a borderline playoff team in the tough AFC.

Timing is everything in the NFL season. In Cleveland, where the Browns have won just one season opener since returning to the league in 1999, it doesn't matter who the opposing team is on opening day. If it involves a loss, it involves misery among the fans on the southern shore of Lake Erie.

Sunday was no exception. After getting thoroughly outclassed in ever phase of the game by the blatantly superior Cowboys, seething, frustration and apocalyptic predictions were the order of the day on Monday. The Browns are sinking like the torpedoed *Lusitania*, and they don't have so much as a Dixie cup to begin bailing water. So, who do you like as the first overall pick next year?

But if you're honest with yourself, the smack-up beatdown the Cowboys handed the Browns Sunday afternoon was probably what you should have expected. If the Patriots with a healthy Tom Brady had come into Cleveland and handed the Browns a 28-10 loss, you sure wouldn't be happy, but you'd understand. It's the Patriots. They're just too good to hang with.

The same deference should be handed to the Cowboys. Now that Brady is reportedly done for the year with a leg injury, Dallas might be the NFL's best team. If they're not the lead dog, they're in the top three. Over the past two years, the only real thing that has stood between them and possible Super Bowl runs is Tony Romo's

tendency to play his worst games in December and January. But Dallas' failure to make it to a record ninth Super Bowl has absolutely nothing to do with talent.

When examining Sunday's game, the first thing that must be done is refract the images through the lens of the talent discrepancy between the two teams. The Cowboys were better than the Browns at virtually every position. In particular, the battle between Dallas' large, athletic offensive line and Cleveland's fat, allegedly run-stopping, non-existent-pass-rush defensive line was laughable.

So the rule of thumb should be to give Dallas their due before shredding the Browns. Dallas could (maybe should) be holding the Vince Lombardi Trophy aloft in February. The Browns are, at the very best, a borderline playoff team in the tough AFC.

All the praise lavished locally on the Browns prior to the preseason was the product of one halfway-decent season after years of wandering the desert. The liberally-applied dose of national TV appearances? The product of an exciting offense combined with a team that tends to draw national viewers when they're good, thanks to a sizeable nationwide fan base.

It's perspective time. The Browns are a middle-of-the-pack team. They're not an offensive juggernaut-- certainly improved over anything they threw out there from 2004-06, but still a far cry from the Air Coryell-era Chargers. And despite how much doom and gloom you might feel like wallowing in, they're probably not destined for 2-14 either.

The Browns will lose to the likes of the Cowboys, Colts, Jaguars and Giants because they're just not good enough to beat them. But they should be good enough to beat the likes of the Bengals, Ravens, Texans and at least earn a split with the Steelers.

So before you embark on a season full of the kind of violent mood swings usually reserved for acne-covered steroid abusers, get a good feel for the Browns' place in the world. It might save you a prescription for high blood pressure medication.

Romeo, oh Romeo...

Having just attempted an even-keeled, quasi-fatalistic approach to the latest Browns disappointment, I have to turn the tables on Romeo Crennel.

Emotional distance and a "*que sera, sera*" attitude is great when you're a fan trying to keep a couple shreds of sanity knitted together in between your ear lobes. But why do I get the feeling that
Crennel
is too straight of a shooter?

I've long thought that Crennel was hired by Randy Lerner because he is the Anti-Butch Davis. Davis was a spin doctor, a relentless apologist for his players (but not the players brought on board by Dwight Clark), an excuse-maker and a control freak. Crennel, by contrast, is a walking, talking dose of truth serum.

Crennel has been around the block in football a few times, he's coached on five Super Bowl winners, and he knows a good football team when he sees it. And if he doesn't see a good football team in his locker room, he's not going to make believe that he does. Puffed-chest bravado just isn't his style. If his team is overmatched
, he's probably the wrong guy to give his team the
ol'
"Hoosiers" pep talk.

If Crennel was coaching David prior to facing Goliath, his pre-fight speech would probably have been something along the lines of "Go out, execute the game plan, try to minimize your mistakes and we'll see what happens. Just don't try to do too much."

If that had been the case, the famous statue of David by Michelangelo would likely look a little more contemplative
.

The trouble is, as much as the fans and media appreciate a coach who speaks the unvarnished truth and doesn't sugarcoat or spin, that's not always the best approach to take with your players, particularly when gearing up for a game. They need inspiration when facing a better opponent, and sometimes, that requires spinning the truth to inflate their collective self-confidence.

Some coaches give impassioned speeches. Some flip tables and scream obscenities. Some show film clips. Some have more subtle methods. But every

good coach knows how to psychologically manipulate his players.

No one outside of the Browns' inner sanctum really knows what Crennel says to his players before the game and at halftime. Maybe the teddy bear really does have a grizzly streak in him. But on Sunday, the entire attitude of the Browns from the end of the first quarter on seemed to be one of resignation. The Cowboys were better, they knew the Cowboys were better, and they didn't even try to pretend that they had a chance of catching up once they fell behind by two touchdowns.

Sending the field goal unit out with a 21-point deficit in the fourth quarter was a head-scratching move in and of itself, but it really underscored the fact that Crennel and Company pulled the plug on the game long beforehand.

It's really a condescending attitude in my opinion, kind of a "Senator, I knew Jack Kennedy and you're no Jack Kennedy" moment. It was basically Crennel saying "I've coached on teams that have beaten the Dallas Cowboys, and you guys are not beating the Dallas Cowboys today."

The truth? Certainly. But far from the message Crennel should be sending to his players.