Do or die. Must win. The season is riding on this game. We've heard all of these phrases ad nauseum this week as Browns fans get ready for the epic clash with the rival Steelers tonight down at Browns Stadium. Brian McPeek believes that this is more the frustration of Browns fans tired of being beaten down by their hated enemies from the east than it is the truth. There is life after Pittsburgh. And 14 more games.

I guess pragmatic fanatics are in short supply.

How else to explain the importance being heaped on this upcoming Browns-Steelers clash Sunday night? These pages and others are full of stories about this ball game being ‘do or die' and ‘a must win' game for the Browns.

I have to believe this is more the frustration of Browns fans tired of being beaten down by their hated enemies from the east than it is the truth. While the game is important for any number of reasons (first and foremost being a win over Pittsburgh evens the Browns record and gives them a win over a division opponent) there is life after Pittsburgh, one way or another. Looking only at the final score is a bit myopic.

But I'll tell you why this game against the Steelers isn't a make or break ball game and there are actually two main reasons;

1. You can start 0-2 and end up just fine; and
2. Even if the Browns win the game against Pittsburgh it doesn't mean they're

on their way to glory.

Let's look at the first reason. History has generally not been kind to teams that begin the season 0-2. Since 1990 only 19 teams have started 0-2 and gone on to make the playoffs. But of those 19 teams that battled back and got in, three went on to win the Super Bowl. If you're looking for more recent history that argues that starting 0-2 is not a death knell then look no further than last season when the NY Giants lost their first two ball games (one to a division opponent and by a combined score of 80-48)) and hoisted the Lombardi Trophy at season's end.

True, the Giants' first loss of the season was on the road against, ironically enough, the Dallas Cowboys. But the Cowboys also went into New Jersey and beat the Giants at home after the Giants followed up those first two losses by winning their next six games. Furthermore, the Giants dispelled the thought that defending their own house was critical. They lost 5 games at home on their way to 10-6.

Now, I'm not sure how NY fans and media viewed that 2nd game of the season. I'm sure they were both probably their same rational selves heading into week two. But I do know the Giants lost that week two ball game and still decided to play out the remaining schedule.

The point being, from purely a record standpoint, the first two games are no more important than any other two game set and winning at home, although generally a really, really good idea, guarantees nothing. The Browns 7-1 record at home in a season in which they didn't qualify for the playoffs, speaks to this fact.

There's simply no disputing the fact that losing your first two ballgames,

regardless of where they are played and whether or not they are lost to a division foe, is not necessarily a death-blow to a team's playoff dreams.

No Browns fans, you should be more concerned about the overall talent and ability on this club. In looking at point #2 above, the Browns beating Pittsburgh would be a tonic for what ails the fans given our inferiority complex, and it would be simply intoxicating to hold scoreboard over a hated divisional and regional rival, but it wouldn't mean that the Browns are any more talented than they are today.

Regardless of what happens Sunday night this is a team with an alarming lack of talent in the linebacker and defensive back positions and with an added burden of inexperience thrown into that secondary. A win over Pittsburgh is not going to change any of that. It's not going to change the injury status of Daven Holly, Sean Jones or Donte Stallworth. It's not going to improve Derek Anderson's touch or Romeo Crennel's ability to lead this team past this current stage of its development.

Look, it's a big game. It's Pittsburgh for God's sake. I've watched about 70 of these meetings and the week following a win over the Steelers changes the mood of the entire NE Ohio area.

I remember clearly 51-0.

I remember clearly Bernie Kosar catching the Steelers in a blitz, giving

a hand signal to Webster Slaughter and watching Slaughter leaving Donnie Shell nearly shoeless as he hauled in a Kosar throw for a 37-31 Browns OT win.

I clearly remember Joe Jones planting Terry Bradshaw forehead deep at Municipal Stadium and I'll never forget Eric Metcalf's two punt return TDs against the dumbest special teams coach in football history.

I get it. It is huge. Let there be blood. And let all of it flow from the guys wearing black and yella.

But the enormity of the game has a lot less to do with the playoffs and the future of this football team than those injuries, lack of talent and the questionable leadership skills of the head coach do.

Regardless of the outcome of the game itself, those issues are the factors that will determine how far this version of the Cleveland Browns goes.

And those issues will still be here Monday morning, win or lose.

Maybe this is just the mind protecting the heart. But I can't see this game as anything more than another huge Browns-Pittsburgh game. It's just not likely going to cure or kill the Browns one way or the other.