Lack of identity. It's been a theme on this site when discussing the current state of the Browns, both on the front page and also in our Browns message forum. And today, Gary's hammered out an excellent piece on the topic. In it, he says that Browns fans have been craving an identity for their football team. And that Randy Lerner and Phil Savage have failed to deliver it.

One thing that seems to continually rub Cleveland Browns' general manager Phil Savage the wrong way is the negativity he perceives among the team's fan base. He's expressed that frustration on more than a few occasions and with the hostility fans have shown this year there's a good bet that he's already reached his set point once again.

But the hunch, call it a suspicion, is that Savage is still not yet in tune with what makes this town tick. Negativity is part of it, certainly, but that's only because Cleveland and its fans of all stripes have had plenty to be negative about for more years than most anyone following the teams these days have been alive.

What Savage clearly doesn't understand, and the configuration of his current team more than makes the point, is what Browns fans covet and the Browns haven't delivered is an identity for their team.

Ask yourself what this team currently stands for, what its identity is, and you'll struggle to articulate anything specific. Look at the logo of TheClevelandFan.com. Despite great internal debate about updating the Browns' reference with something more current than a picture of Bernie Kosar in his glory years, no one could much think of anything more appropriate.

It's not that anyone at the site is deliberately living in the past.

It's just that they, the fans, not been given a present, let alone a future.

But it's not just this site. Speaking far more loudly is the team's own website . Search around it all you like.

Try to find out what the team's core values are, what it is striving to accomplish.

The closest you get is the intrusion of a supposedly menacing looking cartoon drawing of a dog on various pages within the site.

That works as a nod to the teams of the 1980s, like this site's use of the Kosar picture.

But as a reflection of current times, the conclusion one draws is that even the team is still entrenched in a view of itself that is not only no longer relevant, but hasn't been for 20 years.

The truth is that for too many years now the Browns have had no discernable personality and don't seem any closer to it even as Savage continues his extreme makeover of the franchise.

When anyone thinks of the Pittsburgh Steelers, for example, the picture they have in their mind is of a physical team. Though the players have changed, the Steelers have not. First and foremost they seek to pound the ball down an opponent's throat on offense.

On defense, they play fundamentally sound, blitz often and hit hard.

It's nothing fancy, but it does define what they do, year after year, player after player, coach after coach.

By the same token, the Baltimore Ravens, not exactly the oldest franchise around, have built a reputation on the basis of its defense. Maybe that has something to do with linebacker Ray Lewis, but dating back to their Super Bowl year and to this

day, it's a team built around its defense.

On the other hand, it's also known for having as vanilla of an offense that can possibly exist.

The most it asks of its offense is to not get the defense in too deep of a hole.

Maybe that will all change eventually, but even though the Ravens have had only middling success of late, virtually no one counts them out of any game still because of their defense and hasn't for years.

Contrast either of those teams with the Browns. The Browns have been in a perennial rebuild since its rebirth but has yet to pick a direction, any direction.

That starts at the top with owner Randy Lerner and to date it has been among his biggest faults.

His philosophy may be to hire football people to run the team and stay out of the way, but that doesn't absolve him of his duty to set the course and tone of what this team should be about.

By failing to give any discernable direction to Savage, the leader of his football operations, Lerner has left Savage with the abstract job of acquiring talent simply for talent's sake.

While he's had some success, he's done it in a way that's hard to understand, except at a most basic level.

For example, Savage's first project was to build an offensive line, which to that point was among the worst in the league. He signed LeCharles Bentley, then one of the top free agents. Unfortunately, that didn't work.
Savage, understanding that no matter what you ultimately want to accomplish on offense it takes a strong offensive line, pressed forward the following offseason by drafting Joe Thomas and signing free agent Eric Steinbach.

For the most part, this rebuild has worked, but to what end exactly?

Head coach Romeo Crennel is defensive-minded and doesn't seem to have any particular philosophies when it comes to the offensive side of the ball. He stuck with a like minded offensive coordinator in Maurice Carthon until Savage pulled that plug.
Savage brought in Rob Chudzinski, but two years into this offense it's still hard to place a label on it.

The run/pass ratio suggests nothing in particular.

Some weeks it skews well toward the pass, other weeks toward the run.

At the end of last season, however, the Browns passed over 100 more times then they ran.

If this year's trends hold, the ratio will be far closer but will still end with a few more passing than rushing attempts.

Does that mean this is a pass first team? Not necessarily. From the looks of things, it seems to be a team that is quick to abandon the run for the pass the minute it gets behind.

As for the passing game itself, if forced I'd say it trends toward a more vertical approach than controlled, short passes.

At least that was the case last year when quarterback Derek Anderson was near the top of the league averaging more than seven yards per pass.

Yet Anderson this year has the second lowest yards per pass ratio in the league.

That may be a factor of both Anderson's and receiver Braylon Edwards' poor play and may also be due to how opposing defenses are now playing the Browns, but clearly there has been a significant shift.

In short, about the only conclusion you're left to draw is that the Browns offensive philosophy is reactive and not proactive. It doesn't seek to establish much of anything and depends more on attempting to exploit whatever weaknesses that week's opponent may have. For the fan at home, that doesn't much make for interesting or compelling football.

More importantly, it doesn't give them much of a clue on what to expect week to week.

On defense, things are a little easier to figure, at least theoretically. Crennel is a staunch advocate of the 3-4 defense, no matter how ill-suited it may be for the personnel he has.

In furtherance of that philosophical goal, apparently, Savage bolstered the defensive line this past off season, although an argument can be made that no matter the defensive scheme, this line needed bolstering.

But Savage has not acquired the linebackers needed to really make the 3-4 defense work. Rather than adjust philosophies until the talent level catches up instead what you have is mostly a mess.

But beyond Crennel's dogged insistence on building a 3-4 defense, a larger issue remains. The defense for too long has had no personality. Fans still view it through the prism of the glory years of Hanford Dixon and Frank Minnifield mostly because they haven't been given anyone else to rally around.

The Dawgs had their day, but it has long since passed.

At this point, the only people living up to the reputation of the Dawgs are those who sit in the bleachers at each home game.

At least they still harass the opposition even if the players are not quite up to the task.

The fact is that every team, indeed every organization, needs a unifying theme, an

identity that says this is what we stand for and this is what we will do. Right now, all the Browns seem to stand for is the proposition that success is as far off now as it's ever been.