As bad as its been for fans of the Cleveland Browns this season, they can take solace in the fact that they do not, to paraphrase former Bengals' coach Sam Wyche, live in Cincinnati. Cause as rough as things seem, they're worse on almost every level down there. And in this week's Lingering Items, Gary hits on the differences between the Browns and Bengals, looks ahead to Monday night versus the Giants, and also hits on politics entering the Browns locker room.

As bad as its been for fans of the Cleveland Browns this season, they can take solace in the fact that they do not, to paraphrase former Bengals' coach Sam Wyche, live in Cincinnati. Pick an area in which the Browns are deficient, from the front office to the personnel on the field, and you'll see a bigger mess in Cincinnati.

To really understand the depths to which that franchise has plunged, consider just the reaction of fans of both the Browns and the Dallas Cowboys following games against the Bengals in which their teams actually won. To put it mildly, the fans are upset. To put it more accurately, you get the sense that there would have been less reaction from the NRA to a new round of gun control legislation.

Certainly some of the grumbling stems from the fact that the fans of each team have far higher aspirations than merely getting by against the woeful Bengals.

While that's certainly justified in Dallas, in Cleveland is a far different story, but I digress. What really is at play here is that the Bengals, along with the Detroit Lions, have become the model for how not to run a franchise. In that sense, even Browns fans had a right to be a tad angry with their team notwithstanding it was their only win of the season.

The Browns, for all their problems, still have a vast advantage over either Detroit or Cincinnati. Browns general manager Phil Savage may be losing his appeal as of late, but in n Detroit, the Lions got rid of Matt Millen, the only former general manager who could possibly make Dwight Clark look like Scott Pioli. The Browns may have a laconic and absent owner, but in Cincnnati, Mike Brown, the team's owner and president, has steered his franchise so far off the rails, he ought to consider changing his last name to Bidwell. In virtually every way imaginable, Brown has made it so that his team performs at a level each week that rivals the 1999 and 2000 versions of the Browns for sheer incompetence.

At this juncture, it's or no great source of pride when a team beats the Bengals or the Lions. In fact, playing them creates more problems than it solves. A victory is expected. Poor play or loss is cause for a death watch. When you lose to the Bengals or the Lions these days, it generally is cause for setting in motion a daisy-chain of events that leads a team to question not only its talent but its manhood.

The Browns haven't quite sunk to those levels, but as we've seen with the stock market lately, things can change rather quickly. Frankly, the only thing keeping the Browns out of that group is the fact that they did win 10 games last season. But that will only go so far. Right now, the word around the league is that the Browns are a fraud. If they sink further into the abyss, the league will be right and then the Browns will find themselves in fast company with the Bengals and the Lions, meaning they too become the automatic win for each opponent that remains on the schedule.

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That quarterback Derek Anderson is starting on Monday against the Giants is hardly a surprise. Though he played poorly for most of the Cincinnati game, he put together one decent drive late in the game which was all, apparently, Savage and head coach Romeo Crennel needed to justify a decision they had already made anyway.

By any measure, Anderson has not played well this season. Few are suggesting that he be summarily kicked to the curb, never to be heard from again as a result. But kicking him to the sidelines to carry the clipboard for awhile is another matter. Certainly if 16 games last year wasn't enough to reach a final verdict on whether to keep him over Brady Quinn, then certainly playing poorly in four games doesn't constitute a mandate either. In other words, giving him some measure of the benefit of the doubt is justified.

But it doesn't seem the height of outrage to suggest that maybe Quinn deserves a shot. Giving Quinn a real opportunity has absolutely no downside to it, unless you're Savage and Crennel. Apparently having Quinn come in now and play well amounts to some sort of nightmare on 9th Street, as if his success will create an actual quarterback controversy, as opposed to the virtual one playing out anyway.

The thought process that leads Crennel and Savage to not utilize the talent on the bench is symptomatic of why this team has trouble succeeding. They seem far more concerned with managing an apparently fragile Anderson ego than possibly getting the best players on the field. Put it this way: if Anderson's ego is that fragile, he has no business being the quarterback of this team anyway.

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Quinn and Joe Thomas lent their local celebrity status to John McCain's foundering presidential bid earlier this week at a rally in Strongsville and it caused a bit of a stir, but shouldn't have. It's pretty clear, for example, that head coach Romeo Crennel wasn't completely pleased with their appearance and the strong guess, if the email I get is any indication, is that many others were probably bothered as well.

In a column last week, I said that Bengals back up quarterback, Ryan Fitzgerald, had about as much business playing as Sarah Palin did running for vice president. As jokes go, I've written better, I've written worse. But what I didn't anticipate was the anger some readers would have over the idea that politics at all was being interjected into sports. (Not to mention, although that's what I'm now doing, the anger directed toward me for supposedly impliedly criticizing McCain and his perky running mate.)

But the main point of most of these emails was that people see sports as their safe haven from the harsher realities of every day life. Interjecting politics, thus, is as unwelcome as a neighbor's dog that craps in your yard. As for Crennel's point of view, the last thing he needs in that locker room is more distractions. He can barely handle, let alone contain, the ones he has.

Despite what some see as an intrusion politics and sports have often been strange bedfellows and will always be. Jim Brown, perhaps the greatest running back of all time, was never too far from expressing his political point of view. It cost him fans, but only during the week. On Sundays, so long as he continued to grind out the yards, he was universally loved.

And that's ultimately how these things get resolved, at least from a fan's perspective. Sure, there will be a few fans permanently turned off by Quinn's or Thomas' presence at the McCain rally, but they'll be in the minority. Even those who thought either that Quinn and Thomas should keep their political views to themselves or that their time would be far better spent figuring out how to win a few games will still forgive them so long as they go on to play well on Sundays. If Quinn, for example, is not able to deliver the goods, then it will just give those who didn't like him anyway another thing to put on the list.

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This week's question to ponder: Who has a better chance of being with the Browns next year, Romeo Crennel or Syndric Steptoe?