Gary checks in with his Lingering Items, and in this week's column begins to take a look at the race for the AFC North title and what the Browns need to do to make the playoffs. Gary also hits on Kellen Winslow's "mystery injury", the conspiracy theories surrounding it, and the rumors that the Browns are looking to trade him. Lastly, Gary also hits on what DA's big performance Monday night means for Brady Quinn.

It's understandable why the Cleveland Browns' victory last Monday night gave the fans some hope. When the Tennessee Titans are the league's only undefeated team six weeks into the season, you can pretty much conclude that this is shaping up to be a strange year in the NFL. At this point, it's probably easier to name the bottom 10 teams than it is to name the top 10.

Starting the season, most figured that the New England Patriots and the Indianapolis Colts, again, would fight it out for the AFC's top spot. The NFC looked to be the province of the Dallas Cowboys. But an injury to Patriots' Tom Brady, some late offseason knee surgery for the Colts' Peyton Manning and a busted pinky finger for the Cowboys' Tony Romo has everyone rethinking their fantasy football lineups, not to mention their pre-season playoff predictions.

The Browns are still two games behind the Steelers (call it 2 ½ because they already lost to the Steelers) but it no longer seems insurmountable. Part of that is due certainly to the other-world performance of the team against the New York Giants. But a big part of it is the feeling most have outside of Pittsburgh that the Steelers' simply aren't that good, and that was before they had injury problems of their own. Offensively, they're just average and that's with a healthy Willie Parker at running back. Defensively, they've played well all season but they just don't strike anyone as a dominating defense, like the Baltimore Ravens during their Super Bowl year.

Speaking of the Ravens, they, too, are two games behind the Steelers (and a leg up on the

Browns) but somehow they feel further away than Cleveland. Baltimore's defense is again carrying the team but it is far from the most dominant unit in the league, very far from it actually. Offensively, the Ravens remain mostly a mess.

A reassertion by the Browns into the thick of the AFC North race, though, lies in their ability to carry forward the supposedly freakish chemistry that broke out on Monday. That's hardly a proposition worth betting what's left of your 401(k) on. The moon, the stars, the planets and a whole host of intergalactic bodies will all have to align to get the Browns this season to where many fans expected, but in a season of oddities already, anything is possible. Except when it comes to the Cincinnati Bengals, where the only real question is whether Marvin Lewis will quit first or get fired.

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Kellen Winslow's mystery illness and his absence from the Giants' game has sparked all sorts of conversation, from the derivation of the illness itself to an emerging theory that the Browns should consider trading him. It's all rather amusing, actually.

I'm not sure there's any mystery to what is ailing Winslow. It's just that the particular malady hasn't been revealed. For the conspiracy theorists out there that sees virtually everything as a cover-up, this lack of information is probably hiding something sinister. But the reality is that the Browns are just following the law.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, commonly known as HIPAA, set in motion new regulations mandating the privacy of individually identifiable health information. It's the statute and regulations that keeps your employer from releasing your medical information publicly just as it keeps the Browns from releasing the medical information of its employees, including its players.

Certainly, Winslow could authorize the release of the information publicly, but why should he? Fans don't have an absolute right to know his private medical information anymore than they have an absolute right to know the medical information for the guy sitting in Sec. 26, Row D. And spare me the argument that Winslow is highly paid professional athlete as if that somehow changes the equation.

Some fans, like some people, tend to equate their needs with their rights. They may feel a need to know the extent of Winslow's illness in order to make a good decision on who to start in their fantasy football league or to make a wager in Vegas, but that doesn't magically translate into a right to that information. But all the logic or legalities in the world isn't going to stop fans from speculating, even if they'd object vehemently if the situations were reversed. Don't you hate it when something gets in the way of a good conspiracy theory?

As to whether the Browns would be better off without Winslow, that's a stretch. Steve Heiden and Darnell Dinkens had decent games against the Giants, but they are and always will be serviceable back-ups in the NFL, nothing more. Those two are great examples of the one area that the Browns have depth. The minute it reveals itself in a positive way, some fans start losing perspective and immediately want to undercut it by trading away the starter.

It's an old Cleveland mindset, actually, usually practiced though by the Indians. Anyone around long enough to have lived through the Indians in the 1960s and 1970s will remember a seemingly never ending series of trades that all had the same feature, the Indians trading away a steak for three weenies. It kept the team afloat, I suppose, but did nothing to produce a winner. Neither would trading Winslow.

The other thing about Winslow that shouldn't be underestimated is his positive impact on this team. After an incredibly rocky start by a player whose own immaturity nearly cost him his life and not merely his career, Winslow has turned into a rock solid tight end with an incredibly high threshold for pain. He'll never be a great blocker, but he's gotten much better. More importantly, he's got superb pass-catching skills and is not afraid to use them in virtually any situation. He'll make a catch knowing he's going to take a hit. In short, he's one of the few players you can rely on when you need him most.

Winslow runs neck-and-neck with Jamal Lewis as the heart and soul of the entire team. Other players see the pain these two are willing to incur in order to win and gain not just inspiration but the drive not to let them down. If anything, this team needs more players like Winslow, not less.

Letting Winslow go, by whatever means, would be disastrous for the Browns. That's probably why it will eventually happen.

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If Browns quarterback Brady Quinn doesn't have the worst timing of anyone in the NFL, then I'd like to meet who is first. Ok, maybe he's second to Troy Smith, but you get the point. Every time Quinn seems on the precipice of finally starting his career in a meaningful way, fate has a way of jumping up and smacking him in the face. It started with the NFL draft and continued through last week.

Going into Monday night's game, Quinn's moment was nearly in hand. Derek Anderson had struggled for several games dating back to last season and the only one that seemed willing to ignore the on-the-field results was head coach Romeo Crennel. But then Anderson somehow found a groove that had been eluding him. Anyone watching Monday night's game had to notice the look on Quinn's face when the camera flashed to him after Anderson's first touchdown pass. The camera didn't stay on him long, but long enough. It was an expression that said "Looks like I'm not getting behind center in a game anytime soon." When the camera returned a few minutes later, Quinn's expression was far more positive, either because he knew the cameras were now on him or because he was genuinely happy about what was taking place on the field. Still, it was hard to miss his disappointment.

Fans of Quinn won't want to hear this, but if Anderson stays healthy and relatively hot the rest of the season, it's hard to imagine general manager Phil Savage nonetheless dumping him in favor of Quinn. That's probably unfair to Quinn because he's never had much of a chance and Savage won't likely get what he gave up, but the Browns can't continue to pour that kind of money into one position when they have so many other needs. Savage will go with the known commodity, it's the safer bet.

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This week's question to ponder: When the Cincinnati Bengals lost last week to run their record to 0-6, should Chad Ochocinco have changed his name to Chad Ochoseis?