An outburst from a star player on how the team handled his injury and his subsequent recovery from that injury. Another on the field confrontation involving starting quarterback Derek Anderson. And another ugly loss. In Gary's latest, he says that the Browns appear to be a team rapidly fraying at the edges and threatening to unravel completely ... and that Phil Savage may be in denial about it.

The San Francisco 49ers fired their head coach, Dick Nolan, yesterday. The strong sense is that Cleveland Browns general manager, Phil Savage, is just shaking his head in disbelief. “That’s no way to run a franchise,” he’s likely muttering to himself.

Perhaps, but it’s also true that the clearest path to recovery is to first admit you have a problem. At least the 49ers were willing to take that step. Despite arguably more evidence than the 49ers had to work with, Savage remains firmly stuck in denial that his team even has a problem, except when it comes to Winslow.

The outburst on Sunday by Winslow, coming as it did during a game in which quarterback Derek Anderson had another on-field confrontation with another player, demonstrated far more than anything else to date that Savage has a serious problem on his hands. If he thinks suspending Winslow, justified or not, is the answer, then he can't even begin to comprehend the question. Eventually, when Savage has no choice but to take a critical look at the state of his franchise, he’ll see a team rapidly fraying at the edges and threatening to unravel completely. But the longer he waits, the harder the repair job.

Savage's main issue with taking the step the 49ers did, particularly midseason, is the instability it creates. Most certainly, it takes away any chance of the team competing for the rest of the current season. But staying the course just because it's easier and doesn't require reprinting the media guides is no reason to maintain a status quo that isn't all that great to begin with. The Browns aren't going to the Super Bowl this season anyway; why not get a head start on next season?

When the Browns laid an egg on Sunday against the Washington Redskins, the inclination is to think that the picture just got murkier. To the contrary, it actually got clearer. This team needs a new direction, a new discipline no matter how much Savage wants to turn a blind eye to it all.

The game against the Giants was instructive because it revealed the full potential of the team. That's the good news. But it also set a bar that fans rightly expect to be matched each week, if not in total output, at least in approach. Instead, what they have been treated to is a team that is far more notable for its rabid inconsistency and its uncontrollable personalities than as a legitimate contender for football greatness.

After Sunday's loss to the Washington Redskins, a good but not great team, head coach Romeo Crennel was asked why his team couldn't carry forward the momentum it had just six days earlier. Essentially Crennel said that if he knew the answer to that, he'd be a better head coach. Well said. The fact that Crennel can admit that he's clueless can be a useful virtue, but until he can turn that from a concept to an action item it will be a mostly useless virtue.

Meanwhile the evidence against Savage and the direction he's set is starting to pile up like dirty dishes in the sink. First to be dispelled is the myth that the players respect his head coach. If they do, they have a funny way of showing it. Too many times too many of the so-called leaders of the team demonstrate their

public disdain.

Exhibit A is Braylon Edwards. If Savage doesn't want to treat previous season incidents as proof--like the trip to the Ohio State/Michigan game that Crennel told him not to make-- that's fine. Let's look at this last week. One of the more startling admissions after Sunday's game came from Edwards who claimed that he and others on the team were a bit lax after their big win the previous week. It's an admission Edwards has made at several other points in his short career as well. That doesn't mean Crennel isn't saying the right things in the meetings, it's just that after all these years it still hasn't taken hold. That's a respect issue.

If the Browns had one hope of saving this season, it was to build on the confidence it gained in the Giants game by taking it on the field in Washington D.C. They didn't. Among the chief culprits was Edwards who dropped four passes. Edwards shares some responsibility in all of this, certainly, but a great head coach, like a great boss, has to find a way to draw out the best from those he supervises each and every week, to help them translate potential into performance. It's absolutely critical to success and, unfortunately, this is one of Crennel's biggest failures as a head coach.

Ask yourself this question, how many players can you name on this team who have played beyond their abilities? Then compare that answer to this question: how many players can you name on this team who usually play below their abilities? If the answer to the first question is less than the answer to the second, which it is, you start to understand the depth of the problem.

Exhibit B is Winslow. He came to the Browns as a difficult personality and in that regard he's been as advertised. His outburst on Sunday may very well have been contract frustration finally boiling over, as others have argued, and perhaps the suspension was justified. But it's also true that Winslow is not finding a receptive

audience internally from his head coach. Despite the number of times Crennel supposedly has spoken to Winslow about keeping matters in house, it, too, hasn't resonated. That, too, is a respect issue.

If Winslow felt slighted that Savage didn't call him in the hospital last week, imagine how he feels having been made scapegoat for talking about it publicly. Savage may now look organizationally tough, as if he's in control, but all he's done is confirm the existence of a problem in the first place. Winslow's outburst was a symptom, not the disease, particularly when you consider that Winslow didn't place much stock in a phone call Crennel did make to him. As far as Winslow's concerned, Crennel doesn't represent the Browns, Savage does. That's a fairly damning indictment right there of the lack of traction Crennel has gotten with some of his key players and the suspension not only reinforces the point, but arguably makes the problem worse.

Exhibit C is Anderson. At this point it's clear that Savage is far more interested in developing the flyer pick he orchestrated while in Baltimore than he is in developing the number one pick he orchestrated in Cleveland. On this one it's hard to tell what Crennel really thinks but it's clear he's having trouble translating his boss's wishes into reality. Crennel has yet to reach Anderson in a meaningful way. Crennel rarely interacts with his quarterback during the game, despite having a wealth of knowledge about defense that Anderson might actually find useful. He hasn't had much of an impact on smoothing Anderson's wildly uneven development nor in curbing Anderson's emotional need to confront teammates whose mistakes he thinks are making him look bad.

More to the point though is the fact that during the heat of the game, Crennel at times acts as if he's forgotten he's the head coach, something the players can't help but notice. Anderson struggled mightily on Sunday against the Redskins, just as he has for roughly 90% of the team's possessions this season. Most of his passes were off target, often badly. There was absolutely no spark. Yet Crennel, just as he's done most of the rest of the season, sat back wishing a better result

rather than remembering he had the ability to coax a better performance by, if necessary, inserting Brady Quinn into the lineup, even as a change of pace.

Crennel may not want to create a “controversy” by making that kind of move, but every time someone throws that up as an excuse, it’s hard not to wonder whether that’s just a convenient way of apologizing for Crennel’s apparent unwillingness to confront a difficult circumstance and make a hard decision. Changing quarterbacks comes with its fair share of political risk, but a true leader welcomes that challenge precisely because it’s hard. That’s a point Savage would do well to remember as well.

You can talk about all the poor Xs and Os decisions fans witness each week, the utter lack of preparation that symbolizes this team and the seemingly aimless direction of it all and all you’re really doing is describing the personality that has overtaken this team. Even if this team isn’t the reincarnation of the Bronx Zoo, Savage would be a fool to deny that it’s a team beginning to spiral out of control just the same.