As we get ready for a huge game against the Ravens, off the heels of a big win at Jacksonville, Gary checks in with his Lingering Items as he does each week for our readers. Gary starts by talking about the Browns "bend but don't break" defense, which is 6th in football in points allowed. He also hits on the Browns tough remaining road schedule, Shaun Rogers' impact, and Troy Smith's return to Cleveland as a Raven.

The season's halfway point will be reached this weekend and if one thing is certain, for the Cleveland Browns it hasn't gone the way anyone predicted, unless the prediction was for extreme chaos.

Standing at 3-4 and heading into a home game against the Baltimore Ravens, it would be a hard case to make that the Browns' record should be any better. It's an easier case to make that it can and should be even worse.

The actual case is that the record of 3-4 reveals nothing in particular.

It's been a sea of ambiguity thus far without enough markers to really say what's coming next.

When the schedule was rolled out at the beginning of the season, many fans may have been hopeful for a good start, something on the order of 3-1 or 2-2 at worst but more than a few realistically appraised it as a likely 1-3 start, which is what happened. And it happened pretty much like it was supposed to, with the Browns beating Cincinnati and losing to Dallas, Pittsburgh and Baltimore. The Baltimore

loss, which really was the swing game, stung so much because of the way the Ravens defense took over the game in the second half. The other two losses simply served as the reminder of the gap between being good and merely good enough.

But the journey to ambiguity is really where the fun begins. Most fans and probably Browns' coaches figured the offense would be fine.

The fear was on defense in general and the defensive backfield in particular.

Yet the defense and its backfield have proven to be a pretty resilient, consistent group, even without the benefit of the kind of linebacker play necessary to make a 3-4 defense work.

Right now, only six teams are giving up fewer points per game than Cleveland. U nfortunately for the Browns' offense, two of them-Pittsburgh and Baltimore-happen to play in the AFC North.
(It could probably be fairly argued that the fact that both teams played Cleveland helps those stats, but let's not veer off point quite yet).

What's encouraging but mostly unexpected is how the defense, despite its penchant for giving up huge chunks of yards, isn't letting that translate into many actual points.. The Browns, for example, are 12th in the league in yards yielded per game, which is only slightly more than a yard per game better than the woeful Cincinnati Bengals.

On a per play basis, the Browns are actually slightly worse than the Bengals owing to the fact that the Bengals defense has been on the field for 90 more total plays, or an average of more than 10 plays a game, than the Browns' defense.

But the fundamental difference between these two teams is that the Browns' defense can bend a lot further than the Bengals' before it breaks. The Browns have given up a fairly substantial 10 points less

per game than the Bengals despite giving up virtually the same amount of yardage.

This isn't to say that I'm totally sold on the defense, only that it's the unit most responsible for the team's 3-4 record, and I mean that in a good way. The fact that the Browns are 3-4 heading into this weekend's game against Baltimore and playing the kind of offense they've played counts as a minor miracle. The reasons for the woeful offense have been well chronicled and it has engendered some very healthy debate about the sanity of the Browns' management, but suffice it to say that a perceived strength of this team has been the biggest disappointment in the first half of the season.

It's tempting to play the "well, if the offense can get it going and if the defense stays consistent" game and then imagine all sorts of swell scenarios culminating in a legitimate Super Bowl run. It could happen but then reality sets in and you remember that there are still too many missing parts, that quarterback Derek Anderson is incredibly erratic and that the team's head coach goes off script more than Sarah Palin these days.

It doesn't inspire great dreams of a reversal.

Then you have to assume the defense can remain consistent, which while more plausible given the trends isn't something necessarily worth counting on either.

The best thing you can do under these circumstances is go back to where all predictions start anyway, with the schedule. Halfway through a season is a far better barometer by which to judge its relative strength

or weakness than the middle of July.

The good news on that front is that of the remaining nine games, including this weekend's game against Baltimore, five of the games are at home.

If Anderson has demonstrated one trend in his career, it's that he plays better at home.

And as Anderson go often goes the team.

Each of the remaining home games is certainly winnable, but none are a lock. Baltimore still doesn't have an offense to match its defense. De nver was exposed as a fraud on national television a week ago against the Patriots.
Houston and Cincinnati are both second tier clubs and Indianapolis is struggling and looks to for the rest of the season.

Every road game, on the other hand, is going to be difficult, far more difficult than winning the remaining home games. On the schedule are Buffalo, Tennessee, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

If the Browns lost each of those games no one would be surprised.

Thus if things go according to script what you're left with is, actually, where most people started the season believing the team would end up anyway, an 8-8 record. It would be the kind of ambiguous record heading into next season that a team lacking a coherent direction probably deserves anyway.

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Defensive tackle Shaun Rogers was not named by the league as its defensive player of the week for his performance last week against Jacksonville. Those sorts of minor honors are only meaningful if the player has an incentive bonus tied to it so it's certainly not worth the fans getting terribly excited about But Rogers was named defensive player of the week by the NFL's online community.

It would be interesting to see just how many times Jacksonville running backs Fred Taylor and Maurice Jones-Drew voted.

Probably plenty.

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Heisman trophy winner and former Buckeye Troy Smith returns to Cleveland this weekend and while he'll probably get slightly more playing time on Sunday than the Browns' Brady Quinn owing to a few unusual twists the Ravens' offense employs involving Smith, two of the biggest names in college football two years ago can probably look over at each other plenty during the game and just shake their heads and wonder what could have been. Each has been the victim of some bad timing that to this point is stunting their careers.

In the case of Quinn, the drafting of Ted Ginn by Miami pretty much pushed him to the end of the first round. Then his ill-advised holdout as a rookie cost him valuable practice time and any real shot at starting

last season after Charlie Frye melted down in the season's first game.

Anderson took over the starting job by default and his good play, particularly early on, ensured that Quinn would go into this season as the back-up.

Anderson has played awful this season, but each time his rope seems to be taut enough to yank him back to the bench, he whips out a decent performance, or at least a decent series, and head coach Romeo Crennel is forced to let out a little more slack before yanking him for good. It's enough to make you wonder whether Quinn is simply star-crossed.

The same goes for Smith, except in some ways it's worse. Smith was actually headed into this season as the starter.

Steve McNair retired, Kyle Boller, who would have had trouble holding on to his job anyway, injured his shoulder in preseason and was lost for the rest of the year.

That left just Smith and rookie Joe Flacco.

But Smith came down with a severe tonsil infection that wiped out his chances in preseason and early season.

Flacco then played well enough to keep the job and a few weeks ago was named starter for the rest of the season.

Smith, like Quinn, is now forced to wait for either an injury or a stretch of ineffective play before getting a legitimate chance to establish himself as a NFL quarterback.

Makes one wonder if he, too, is simply star-crossed.

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This week's question to ponder: Who is more responsible for the play of this year's defensive play, Phil Savage, Romeo Crennel or Mel Tucker?