Gary's been knocking 'em out of the park all year writing op-ed pieces on the Browns for us, and this week's Lingering Items is no exception. Gary talks about the "quitter" allegations levied by Jamal Lewis and Josh Cribbs, he notes Phil Savage's reluctance to rework contracts, and wonders aloud in his question of the week: what would this team's record be this season with Bill Cowher as coach?

Cleveland Browns general manager Phil Savage certainly has serious shortcomings as an administrator but it hasn't hampered his evaluation skills. The current record notwithstanding, the Browns' roster has far more talent on it than when he got here.

It's far from a roster fully realized but when you compare it to teams like Cincinnati and Kansas City for example you get the feeling that a really good head coach would rather have the Browns' roster than either of the other two. (This is what I call column foreshadowing.

Pay attention.)

But the Browns' record being what it is, that doesn't speak well for the current head coach, a point readily apparent every week. If Randy Lerner does decide to restructure in the midst of cleaning house, whoever comes in will at least find a cupboard with a few staples in it.

That's where Josh Cribbs comes in.

Cribbs more than any player on the current roster is doing his best to hold this team together. It's not an easy task. Playing off of comments that Jamal Lewis first expressed after the Denver game, Cribbs told the media this week that indeed some players quit on the team during the most critical moments of that game and that they'll have to be weeded out. He didn't specify who.

He didn't have to.

Suffice it to say that when a player of Cribbs' stature goes public on one of the most serious allegations you can make against a teammate, it reverberated well past the scribbled notes on a reporter's notebook.

When a coach is under as much fire as Browns' head coach Romeo Crennel, the final measuring stick often is whether or not the players have quit playing for him. Cribbs essentially answered that question for Savage and now it's Savage's turn to do something more than turn a deaf ear to it.

You almost get the sense that if the Browns don't play a complete game next Monday night against Buffalo, even in defeat, Crennel won't survive the season.

All of which makes me wonder whether Terry Robiskie, as close to a professional interim coach as exists in the NFL, might be available for the rest of the season.

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Speaking of Cribbs, he's the only Browns Pro Bowl player from last year who hasn't noticeably regressed. Slowed by injuries earlier in the season, Cribbs is rounding into Pro Bowl shape, particularly in the last two games.

His season averages on kick off and punt returns are only slightly behind last year's averages and with seven games still remaining he easily can equal or exceed those numbers.

Against Denver, for example, Cribbs averaged 30 yards per kick return, the same as last season.

Against Baltimore, he was even better averaging 33 yards per return, including a 92-yarder for a touchdown.

What is often overlooked when it comes to Cribbs, though, is his presence on the Browns' kick team. He's often the first body down the field and is often the first to make a hit on an opposing returner. Thanks in large part to Cribbs, only three teams-Pittsburgh, Jacksonville and Washington-are holding opposing teams to less kick return yards.

Even so, the difference between the best team, Washington, and Cleveland is a mere ½ a yard per return.

Cribbs is on this team and under a long-term contract thanks to Savage. Cribbs was a talented but somewhat mercurial player for the Kent State Golden Flashes.

Despite compiling a whole host of Kent State offensive records and securing his place in the NCAA record book, Cribbs went undrafted.

Part of that was due to the fact that he played for Kent.

But also figuring prominently was the red flag Cribbs sent up when he was arrested in January, 2004 for allegedly trafficking in marijuana.

Ultimately he pleaded guilty to possession.

He learned his lesson. Since coming to the Browns, Cribbs has been a model citizen and one of the few players you can actually point to who does more walking than talking. Cribbs did raise a few eyebrows at the beginning of training camp this season when he suggested he'd be looking for a new contract, despite signing an almost unprecedented (for a special teams player anyway) six-year contract extension last November that included a $2 million signing bonus.

But to Cribbs' credit, he didn't make his desire for a new contract much of an issue. He said back in August that he wouldn't be a distraction to the team and has been true to his word. Instead he worked hard to rehab his injury and has played hard since returning. He's rounding into shape at the right time.

The problem, of course, is that the rest of the team isn't cooperating which is at the base of Cribbs' frustration.

He knows that his contributions will go mostly unnoticed as the team collapses under the weight of the expectations placed on it.

Despite his contributions and his emerging presence as a leader, it's doubtful that Savage is in any hurry to renegotiate a contract that is barely a year old and has five more to run. But if Cribbs continues to perform at this same level next season, Savage will find himself in the uncomfortable position of having to retrench on this issue. On a team with so few leaders in the first place, Savage simply can't afford to alienate one of them.

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Savage's reticence to renegotiate contracts appears to be more philosophically-based than economically induced. Right now, Cribbs' salary takes up very little room under the salary cap.

In fact, the Browns salary cap payroll, which differs from actual payroll, shows them to be around $16 million under the approximately $110 million salary cap.

That's not unusual; all but two teams are under the salary cap, most by a similar amount.

Within the division, both the Browns and the Steelers have a similar cap payroll.

The Bengals have even more room, coming in at a cap payroll of around $92 million.

The Ravens have the highest cap payroll, around $102 million, still well below the league salary cap.

It's worth noting that in a given year a team's salary cap payroll may be higher or lower than its actual payroll for a number of reasons. For example, the Browns paid Cribbs a $2 million signing bonus last season.

However, only 1/6 of that amount gets allocated to salary cap each year, assuming Cribbs is with the Browns all six years.

If he gets cut, that number would be accelerated meaning whatever amounts were to be credited against future salary caps gets credited instead against the cap in the year he was cut.

Thus, while the Browns aren't actually paying Cribbs 1/6 of his signing bonus this year, the cap payroll is artificially inflated as if they did.

Similarly, former players often account for salary cap space well after they've been cut.

On a quick review of the Browns' salary cap, they appear to be in pretty good shape going into 2009, the last year a cap will be in place unless there is a new agreement between the players and the owners. Well, they are in pretty good shape if you look at it from the amount of room they have under the cap and the amount of dead money in the cap, dead being defined as money for players not on the team any longer. Only about 2.5-3% of the Browns' cap is the result of players no longer on the team.

Thus on both those measure, the Browns are fine.

The far more relevant question though is whether the Browns are getting back in value anything close to what they are devoting their financial resources to. Just guessing here, but most fans would say they aren't, in resounding fashion.

They are probably right. For example, the players taking up the most cap space are those you'd expect: Eric Steinbach, Braylon Edwards, Kellen Winslow, Derek Anderson, Joe Thomas and Jamal Lewis. Anderson is chewing up over $3 million of cap space while Edwards has almost $8 million

allocated to him.

Whatever you think of either, it's at least fair to say that this season the Browns aren't getting their money's worth.
But when it comes to the others, it's a harder call irrespective of the actual cap figure (which is substantial for players like Steinbach and Thomas).

The play of Anderson and Edwards, for example, has had such a negative impact on the team that discerning overall value is difficult.

Defense, though, is where it's an easier call. After the last two weeks, the Browns defense has sunk to 27th in the league based on total yards. A little less than half of the Browns' cap is devoted to the defense.

Assuming Pittsburgh, for example, is in a similar position, it appears as though the league's top-ranked defense is getting far more for their $48 million than the Browns.

Depending on who you consider to be the starters, somewhere between $6-9 million of cap space is devoted to the starting linebackers. Ouch. Another $11 million is dedicated to the defensive line.

Double ouch.

By contrast, the defensive backfield, featuring mostly young players or veterans just hanging on, accounts for around $6 million in cap space, not including Devan Holly who is on the injured reserve.

That doesn't seem like all that much but then again the Browns aren't getting all that much in return these days.

For the Browns to really improve, they not only need better players, but Savage needs to acquire them in a way that maintains salary cap integrity. It's not a function of just spending big dollars on pricey free agents. It's more the art of filling out the majority of the team with players whose value far exceeds their cap space. It's the number one reason the New England Patriots remain a top team, even without Tom Brady. Right now, the Browns' roster clearly is underperforming. That doesn't mean it's misbalanced in the long run, though it is relative to the Patriots, but it further emphasizes why a head coach who can draw out the talent is so critical to the overall health of a franchise.

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One of the reasons that fan disappointment in the Browns is so intense is related to the expectations that they had at the outset. The easy conclusion is that those expectations in retrospect were ridiculous.

I would agree if the expectation was that this team was a legitimate threat to get to the Super Bowl. But if the expectations were of a team that could or should win its division and go a little deep in the playoffs, then they weren't off the mark.

As it's playing out, the Pittsburgh Steelers aren't nearly as good as they looked earlier in the season. Injuries are starting to take their toll. The loss at home to Indianapolis on Sunday provided a nice overview of the state of that team. The Cincinnati Bengals are as awful as predicted and likely wouldn't be much better even if Carson Palmer was healthy.

The Baltimore Ravens, on the other hand, have surprised.

Behind a rookie quarterback less heralded than the Browns' Brady Quinn, the Ravens are scoring points at a decent clip.

Meanwhile, a defense that is banged up is still performing.

Ray Lewis, easily one of the most annoying players in all of sports, still has the ability toactually
inspire his teammates even as his own skills deteriorate.

On paper, though, there is no reason the Browns shouldn't be in this mix. The division is not that strong, even given Baltimore's surprising play. The Browns' roster, again on paper, matches up well against its two main divisional rivals. That the Browns have been relegated once again to an afterthought is frustrating, certainly, but even more so is the way they've gone about taking themselves out of it.

Browns' fans aren't a patient bunch by nature but they have and likely would have again tolerated a hard-working, well run team falling just short but heading in the right direction.

What they've been given instead is a team off track filled with a bunch of egomaniacal divas with a sense of entitlement that overreaches their accomplishments overseen by a kindly grandfather who can't bring himself to reign in someone else's kids.

It's a team without direction or personality.

There simply is no sense of where this ride will stop next.

All of which leads to this week's question to ponder: what would the Browns' record be right now if Bill Cowher was the team's head coach?