Lingering Items is chock full of juicy nuggets from our guy Gary Benz this week as he takes on several hot button topics surrounding the floundering Cleveland Browns. Gary talks about Phil Savage throwing Romeo under the bus in interviews and posturing to try and save his own job. He hits on Savage's control of the 53 man roster. And also comments on the fans booing an injured Derek Anderson. It's Friday. It's Lingering.

If Cleveland Browns general manager Phil Savage's impromptu press conference on Wednesday proved anything, it's that there's at least as much chill inside the Berea complex as outside. While seemingly building up his hand-picked head coach, the same one he gave a two-year contract extension worth $4 million a year this past January, Savage also made sure everyone not only understood the line of demarcation between the two but also who's doing their job and who isn't.

Essentially disavowing any responsibility for the on-the-field results, Savage made it clear to the media, just as he had made it clear to the players a few weeks ago apparently, that Savage picks the roster, Crennel fills out the weekly dance card. Indeed, this was the second time Savage made that same point, telling the media a few weeks ago, "My responsibility is the 53-man roster, and then it's Romeo and the rest of the coaching staff's decision how to utilize the 45 players who are dressed on Sunday.

If I'm going to get involved in those decisions, then I may as well put a headset on and double my salary."

This latter comment caught the attention of the CBS NFL Live crew last Sunday. James Brown, the studio host, likened it to Savage essentially throwing Crennel under the bus.

At the time, I thought that was a bit of an overstatement.

But given Savage's comments on Wednesday, now I'm not so sure.

Savage claims he's just trying to build up Crennel's credibility with his players by tamping down any thoughts that Savage or anyone else is making decisions on who plays each week. That would be more believable if Savage then hadn't spent a good part of his press conference talking about how disappointing the season has been yet essentially patting himself on the back for the wonderful job he's done, saying "The football operations part of this organization is stronger than it has ever been."

But that was hardly the extent of it. It went on. "I think we have a lot of good players," Savage said.
"When you watch the tapes, the individual matchups, we have more than enough ability to compete in this league and play good football and we've shown that." See the pattern?

It's not the pieces Savage put in place, it's the execution.

Still skeptical?

Consider what Savage said next.

"I think one of the most troubling things that's happened is when we have a bad play, it's followed by an even worse play.

It's been like a chain reaction for that two or three-play focus or concentration.

It's something we've got to get a handle on."

So if Savage is doing his job but the players are losing focus or concentration, whose fault could that be? Hmmm, I wonder. Savage may not be hanging Crennel completely out to dry with his comments, but there's no question he's clearly distancing himself from the soon-to-be former head coach.

Savage may see himself as an honorable man, earnestly trying to do the best he can. But he's also turned into a ruthless opportunist who rarely misses a chance to deflect criticism and diffuse responsibility. Savage is right in his

assessment of the problems on the field and while he didn't say directly it is Crennel's fault, he didn't have to.

But Savage is just as much to blame, which he was not so quick to acknowledge.

In the first place, he's the one that gave an unproven coach with just one winning season a two-year contract extension instead of waiting to see if last season was the aberration or the previous two seasons were. Second, Savage has created more than his share of messes this season and has left others, usually Crennel, to clean it up.

In the meantime, Crennel and Savage continue to drift further and further apart. I n the structure that is the Browns' organization, that isn't good news for Crennel.

It was reported last week that Crennel needs a miracle finish to retain his job.

That isn't true.

He needs a miracle.

**

One of the more amusing comments Savage made in his press conference was when he said "I'm an open book. I can walk with my head held high." Savage is hardly an open book by even the most generous of measurements.

It was his first press conference in two months.

His media appearances in between have been simply to address, in vague and defiant terms, his mishandling of the Kellen Winslow staph infection issue and the profane email he sent to a fan.

Even these were after the fact and not when his alleged openness could have

helped diffuse the situation.

At best, Savage opens only occasional chapters and keeps most of the rest of the story to himself.

The second most amusing comments Savage made were with regard to his claim that he doesn't dictate who gets to play each Sunday. While claiming the decisions reside solely with Crennel, he then noted that "Do we talk about it during the week? Absolutely. Have I said, 'I'd like for us to play so and so,' or 'Maybe we could get this guy in the game more? Absolutely.

But it's the coach's decision.

That's the way it works across the whole NFL."

Savage may be correct that it works that way across the NFL, but he is being more than a bit disingenuous in under playing his influence on who plays each week. Anyone who has ever worked for anyone understands a pecking order. When the boss tells suggests how you should do something, woe be to you if you do something different and it doesn't work out.

If Savage says to Crennel "I'd like you to play Alex Hall" and is ignored, what do you think the tenor of their next conversation might be?

The other thing is that Savage isn't saying is that by choosing the roster in the first place, he often effectively limits Crennel's choices each week anyway. If Savage doesn't give Crennel any other viable receivers, does Crennel really have any other choice but to play Braylon Edwards?

**

The fact that Savage has the final say over who makes the final 53-man roster may come as a surprise to some but it's actually more common than not in the NFL. On the surface, it doesn't seem like a big deal because there probably isn't much disagreement over the first 45-50 players on the team anyway. The battle, if any, between the coach and the general manager comes over the last few players on the roster.

A coach, particularly one that is fighting for his coaching life, might want to keep an extra veteran or two on the roster. A general manager, with an eye on the future and another on the budget might think a lower-priced late round draft choice or an undrafted free agent might be a better choice.

In the end, how that all plays out probably doesn't matter much, unless, again, you're a coach fighting for your job, which is pretty much every coach in the NFL.

Consider just this Browns' season. When Savage traded Leigh Bodden and Daven Holly went down with a season ending injury, the Browns' secondary was suddenly extremely thin. It was Savage's decision to not sign a veteran presence to make up for the shortfall.

Instead, he basically dictated, by not signing anyone else, that Crennel would have to make do with Ben McDonald and Eric Wright.

Crennel, as a defensive specialist, knows better than anyone else that a starting defensive backfield of McDonald and Wright was going to struggle. And it has. It's also helped to contribute to a few of the Browns' losses.

But because Crennel doesn't get to make those decisions, he effectively has no choice but to trot out two players who aren't ready for prime time and hope for the best.

Crennel, for all his faults, isn't one to make excuses. He's never complained, for

example, about some of Savage's more questionable decisions.

But there's no question that Crennel would have filled out those final roster spots much differently, particularly as this season has gone on, knowing that he's going to be sacrificed for the failures at season's end.

**

There's been much talk by high-minded media types about the handful of fans that supposedly cheered when Derek Anderson was injured last Sunday. I say supposedly because it's not all clear what this group was or was not cheering.

These media types are shocked, just shocked, that anyone would cheer an injured player.

Maybe these folks need to venture outside of the press box once in awhile. It's hardly a State secret that in a crowd of 70,000 plus each week, there will be a handful of jerks.

Sometimes more than a handful.

Assuming they were cheering the Anderson injury (an assumption I'm not ready to make), it may be uncalled for, but it probably wouldn't even make the list of the dumbest things that happened in the stands that day, let alone all season.

Just ask the guy whose still probably trying to get vomit stains off of his pant leg if he would have rather sat, instead, next to someone whose only dumb act was to cheer an injury.

But as I said, I'm not even convinced they were truly cheering Anderson's injury in the first place. They may have been callously cheering an injury to one of their own, but it's also possible that they were just expressing their frustration with the

whole mess that lay in front of them.

If Savage thinks this has been a trying time for him and the organization, he can only imagine the abject frustration of the fans. What they are most tired of is false promises, prima donna players, and coaches and management that act as if they've never seen a NFL game in their lives.

Anderson, fairly or not, embodied many of those frustrations. It's highly doubtful anyone was happy he was injured. It's highly likely that whoever was cheering was sending a message to Savage and owner Randy Lerner that they're fed up, with the high prices, the low performances, the cold weather and the economy, to name just a few.

**

Last season, the Browns missed the playoffs in part because the Tennessee Titans, this week's foe, beat the Indianapolis Colts, who were resting their starters, on the last game of the season. Maybe the Colts are starting to regret tanking that game. That late season momentum and experience the Titans gained by getting in the playoffs last year has more than carried into this season, at the expense of the Colts.

With all that in mind, this week's question to ponder: If Ken Dorsey instead of Kerry Collins was the quarterback of the Titans, would they still be 11-1?