There was a point in time, from the 2007 draft to roughly mid-2008, when former Browns GM Phil Savage was lauded around town as the anti-Mark Shapiro/anti-Danny Ferry. Fans admired his willingness to strike big in free agency and make aggressive trades to try and improve the team. Eric Mangini was hired, in part, because he told Randy Lerner he could win with Phil's guys. Yet ... he is offing them all, one by one. Is this rebuild necessary? And why was Scott Pioli dismissed for thinking so? Erik Cassano opines.

There was a point in time, from the 2007 draft to roughly mid-2008, when former Browns GM Phil Savage was lauded around town as the anti-Mark Shapiro/anti-Danny Ferry.

While the general managers of the Indians and Cavaliers played it close to the vest with trades and free agent signings, laboring under the supposed pretense that no move was better than an overly risky move, Savage was a riverboat gambler. He had cap space, he had the deep pockets of Randy Lerner, and he wasn't afraid to use them.

Savage became known around Cleveland as the GM who would bring a free agent to town and not let him leave Berea without a contract. That's how he landed Eric Steinbach and Joe Jurevicius. Both of those marquee signings helped the Browns seemingly turn their fortunes around with a 10-6 season in '07.

That following winter and spring, Savage used the same aggressive approach to try and improve the defense, trading away the team's '08 second round pick to the Packers for defensive lineman Corey Williams, and dealing their '08 third-rounder plus Leigh Bodden to the Lions for Shaun Rogers. The latter trade occurred after a trade that would have sent Rogers to Cincinnati fell through at the last minute. It was a headline-grabbing example of Savage's opportunism.

If you looked hard enough, you could certainly find critics, those who cautioned us that pawning off draft picks like Monopoly money is generally bad business in

sports (see Stepien, Ted). But most of us were as lightheaded as bobby-soxers at a post-World War II Frank Sinatra concert. A Cleveland GM? Aggressively trying to improve his team? Yes, please.

Fast forward to March 2009. The Browns are coming off a 4-12 season. The names of Savage and Romeo Crennel have been relegated to the team's history books. George Kokinis and Eric Mangini have replaced them, and distance has offered some perspective on Savage, Crennel and the jobs that Mangini and Kokinis have before them as they drop the engine and become the latest tandem of mechanics to attempt repairs to the Browns roster.

The overarching question facing Mangini and Kokinis: Is the Browns roster in need of a rebuild?

According to media reports, Mangini felt he could win with much of the current roster intact. It was allegedly one of his main selling points to Lerner when he interviewed for the head coaching job. Scott Pioli's reported desire to scrap the Browns' roster and begin anew might be the biggest reason why he is now the main football operations man in Kansas City and not Cleveland.

But anyone can say anything to land a job, and Mangini, for all his built-in-Belichick's-image secrecy, probably did a great job of selling Lerner on the idea that the Browns have a talent to win, but they need the right coach and front office to facilitate winning. Likely followed by a smile and thumbs-up reminiscent of "Bob" from the ubiquitous Enzyte TV commercials.

When Mangini arrived on the job and finally brought aboard his right-hand man in Kokinis, their opinions on what to do with the Browns roster might have started to change. If it hasn't, circumstances might force their collective hand. The Browns roster is not as healthy as we might want to believe.

In retrospect, many of Savage's most praised moves from the past two years now look like the work of a GM who was playing for the immediate future, a GM who was unsure of whether he was going to retain his job if he didn't start winning right away. It's great to expedite the rebuilding process when you can, but in 2007 and '08, Savage simply did not care about the fallout his moves might cause in 2009 and '10.

Savage's thinking was probably something like this: If he could put a winner on

the field in '07 and '08, it would buy him more time to figure out what to do when age, injuries and the salary cap brought the piper to town looking for his pay. If he failed, he'd be fired, and the mess would be someone else's to clean up. The second scenario became reality in January.

Now it is, in fact, time to pay the piper for the short-term moves of Savage, and Mangini and Kokinis have some difficult decisions to mull over.

They've already started, trading away Kellen Winslow -- a player Savage inherited from Butch Davis. Winslow likely would have been dealt no matter who had been running the team. Winslow had simply worn out his welcome in Cleveland. Winslow wasn't a Savage move, but it marked the beginning of the deconstruction of the Savage roster -- or at least the problem areas therein.

Since then, notable cuts have included Joe Jurevicius, an extremely popular local boy who is now a 30-something possession receiver coming off seven knee operations, due to post-surgical staph infections. Kevin Shaffer, a major offensive line free agent signing three years ago, was also cut. Both were cut, in part, to avoid a combined roster bonus of $1.25 million. The payment of roster bonuses is a major drawback of trying to reorganize an NFL roster filled with expensive free agent signings. It inevitably leads to cuts if a team is looking to save money.

That's before we even broach the subject of Shaun Rogers, who last month asked for a trade or release because either A) his feelings were hurt because Mangini didn't greet him on several occasions, B) his feelings were hurt because Browns officials asked him to come to camp in shape and not pushing 400 pounds, or C) he saw the fat contract awarded to Albert Haynesworth by the Washington Redskins, and wants a piece of that action.

Now, Mangini and Kokinis have another curious case to deal with in Donte Stallworth, who reportedly struck and killed a pedestrian while driving in Miami on Saturday. Charges hadn't been filed against Stallworth as of Saturday night, but if blood-alcohol tests find that he was over the legal alcohol limit in Florida, it instantly becomes an imprisonable offense upon conviction.

Keep in mind that Stallworth inked a seven-year, $35 million contract with the Browns a year ago. About $10 million of that is guaranteed. There is a chance that Stallworth's deal could be voided if he is charged and convicted, and those circumstances violate his contract. But regardless of the outcome, it's another

sideshow the Browns don't need, and more money they don't need to pay out for little or no production.

Losing Stallworth might be viewed as a positive by many fans, but it would also deprive the Browns of their supposed No. 2 receiver and create serious depth problems at the position when combined with the losses of Jurevicius and Winslow. Mangini and Kokinis might be forced to draft a receiver they weren't otherwise planning to draft.

That's on top of glaring needs at linebacker, in the secondary, on the right side of the offensive line, the lack of a true pass rusher, and the knowledge that Jamal Lewis is running on fumes, necessitating the acquisition of a feature running back within the next two offseasons.

Put it all together, and the new Browns regime is not in an enviable position. Perhaps they're doing all they can at the moment -- purging the sideshows, bringing in some solid-if-unspectacular help through Mangini's Jets connections, and preparing for the draft. The last item is the most important on the checklist.

In the NFL, team building is all about the draft, and successful drafting is the only way a team achieves what the Patriots and Steelers have achieved this decade. There is no way around it.

Savage tried to find a way around it. He left Mangini and Kokinis with a roster full of Band-Aids, short-term fixes designed to save the jobs of Savage and Crennel, but never designed to promote a long term winning culture. And in the end, that's exactly what Savage received for his efforts -- a quick-fix 10-6 season that saved his job for the immediate future, followed by a cold splash of reality as his team crumbled around him one year later.

That reality is what Eric Mangini and George Kokinis are dealing with presently.