One month until the NFL Draft. And with an off-season that has been far from sexy, and has some fans frothing at the mouth, people are really looking forward to the draft. Enter Hiko. And man is it good to see him back on the front page. In his latest Browns Outsider, he offers up a comprehensive analysis of the off-season to date. Who we've signed, who we should have signed and didn't ... or couldn't. Who might still det dealt, and to who. Who we're going to draft, and why. And all with Hiko's no-nonsense approach and rapier like wit. *A View From The Cheap Seats*

1 Month Until The Draft

Some decades, it just ain't easy being Brown.

It's hard to put a positive light on the Berea developments these days. One wants to be objective, to give this new regime every chance to prove themselves that their predecessors had, but one also finds it difficult to shake off the doom and gloom of 10 years of almost unabated suckage, of the failures of previous team officials that acted in similar ways and went down in flames.

It's easy to give in to the purveying negativity, especially when it is so difficult to see the Plan. We must assume that Mangini & Kokinis have a Plan, but it's nigh impossible to see how the actions taken will result in a consistent winner.

And since we are not privy to the Plan, we are all vastly frustrated because it sometime appears that these guys know about as much about what they're doing as I would if I were forced to perform an emergency C-Section with a spoon.

In my opinion (hope), Mangini & Kokinis have too much experience for that to be the case. Thus, I will await the fruition of the Plan, then judge whether or not to order their dismemberment.

This course of action has led to accusations of being stupid or a shill or a Pollyanna. I don't see the point in defending myself. People will think what they may of my takes - I'm not going to argue with them in an attempt to change their minds. Maybe I am a stupid shill Pollyanna. I see what I try to do as objective analysis, which I believe is sorely lacking in this town, but I could just be delusional, refusing to accept the truth.

Of course, in this matter, there is no "truth". The future is unset - no one knows what it holds.
We can render our guesses, and precedent leans heavily in one direction, but there is no certainty of outcome.

If acknowledging that fact and allowing that, perchance, there is a Plan makes one a stupid shill Pollyanna, then so be it.

Adversity leads to interesting societal observation. When the going gets tough, everyone gets going in different directions.

There is no right direction.

Everyone feels justified in their own reactions, and, in the end, they all have a handful of valid reasons for reacting the way they do.

Take Odo and Luther. Odo and Luther, along with many other people, contracted a possibly deadly virus (perhaps the Staph). Immediately, they were rounded up and quarantined.

The doctors informed them that there was no known cure and they were to remain in confinement until either a) their bodies developed a tolerance to the infection and killed it or b) um, well, you know.

Let's join Odo and Luther, already in progress:

INT. HOLDING CELL - ANYTIME

Men sit in huddled bunches against the cement wall of this large darkly lit holding room, heads bowed in exhaustion or defeat. Slowly, Odo makes his way from one of the groups of men to Luther, who sits against a nearby wall, a depressed look on his face.

Odo (sitting): *This sucks.*

Luther: *You can say that again.*

Odo: *I'm too young to die.*

Luther: *Well, hopefully, we won't.*

Odo: *Whaddaya mean?*

Luther: *Maybe we won't die. We haven't died yet.*

Odo: *How can you say that? Sven died, Arnie, Ang, Bubba, Larry, Meaux... they all died...*

Luther: *Yeah, but the doctors said that other test groups have developed immunity to the strain and gotten better. There's a chance that, in time, we will too.*

Odo: *In time? We've been in this cell for 10 years! Don't be stupid. Look around you.*

Open your eyes.

WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE!

RIGHT BOYS?

Half-hearted yells of support come from some of the other detainees leaning against the walls.

Luther: *You're right. We probably will die. But we DON'T know that for sure.*

Odo: *Don't you get it? We're f***ed! We're doomed!*

Luther: *I guess we'll just have to wait and see. One thing's for sure, we're definitely not dying today.*

Odo: *How can you just sit there and lie to yourself?*

Luther: *I'm not lying to myself. I've done my time screaming at walls through megaphones and punching mirrors. I just don't see the point any more in endlessly bitchin' and moanin' about something I can't control.*

Odo: *WE'RE GONNA PERISH IN THE FLAMES OF... SOMETHING BAD! THE RATS SNEAK OUT OF THEIR HOLES TO RIP OUR DEAD FLESH!*

WE DIE, DIE, DIE HACKING AND COUGHING BLOOD, DIE WITH OUR EYEBALLS MELTING IN OUR HEADS, THERE IS NO HOPE, ONLY DEATH!

Luther: *Whatever you say...*

Odo: *THE ANGEL OF DEATH DRAWS HIS FELL SWORD! OUR FATE IS SEALED! WE SHOULD JUST LIE DOWN AND STOP BREATHING AND HASTEN OUR BITTER DOOM!*

Odo rants on as Luther shakes his head and stands up, patting Odo's hand sympathetically.

Luther: *I'm just gonna go sit way over there for a little while.*

PS - If you think I'M an optimist, then you must've had a damn hard life indeed.

The Browns have released/traded/let leave through Free Agency a number of players. Let's examine them.

Signed Elsewhere:

Bruce Gradkowski (QB) - Signed by the Oakland Raiders

Not even worth discussing.

Darnell Dinkins (TE) - Signed by the New Orleans Saints

Good blocker, but awful hands. A negligible loss.

Mike Dragosavich (P) - Signed by the Indianapolis Colts

A backup punter.

Scott Young (G) - Signed by the Denver Broncos

Raise your hand if you even knew he was on the team.

Andra Davis (LB) - Signed by the Denver Broncos

Denver has a history of picking up our discarded, useless defenders.

Travis Daniels (CB) - Signed by the Kansas City Chiefs

Snicker.

Steve Cargile (S) - Signed by the New York Giants

Chortle.

Jason Wright (RB) - Signed by the Arizona Cardinals

Jason's decent, but hardly an elite Back. I appreciated how hard he tried, and how he did the little things, but he was hardly irreplaceable.

Sean Jones (S) - Signed by the Philadelphia Eagles

Ah, finally, someone that matters. Since there is currently no replacement for Jones, this is a significant loss. Not that I feel that Jones is an elite Safety, but he's decent, and probably not easy to replace with what's left out there.

His departure weakened an already weak secondary.

However, he probably wasn't worth anywhere near what he was asking to stay in Cleveland.

You see, due to the Browns recent history, they have to overpay if they want to win a bidding war against a team that has a track record of success.

Traded:

Kellen Winslow (TE) - Traded to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers for 2nd and 5th Round picks.

There is little doubt that Winslow was the best pass catcher the Browns had. His speed is somewhat reduced, and he can't really play the traditional Tight End position (he was more of a glorified slot receiver), but he was an offensive weapon, and his productivity will be missed.

That being said, it is likely that NFL does mean Not For Long for K2. Hi s knee probably looks like the inside of a pumpkin at this point, and his shoulder issues and etc... I don't see him being terribly efficient for much longer.

Plus, the Browns can still get production out of the Tight End position without him.

They proved that in their finest Offensive game of the year against the Giants.

In the end, this trade will be judged by the performance of the player selected at # 50 (the 2nd Round pick they got for him). I feel that getting a 2nd and a 5th for Winslow is a good trade - a clear case of a team selling high in

anticipation of a production drop-off (kind of the way Savage should've done with DA last year).

And if that 2nd Round player turns out to be as solid as a player should be that is selected that high, then this trade was a win for Cleveland.

But if Mangini & Kokinis draft the way their predecessors did and the guy picked at # 50 blows goats, then it was a bad trade.

Ambiguous enough for you?

Cut, but Unsigned:

Ken Dorsey (QB)

‘Bout freakin' time.

Antwan Peek (LB)

I was somewhat surprised by this at the time, but since he's still out there, maybe they know something I don't.

Jason Reda (K)

Who?

Eric Young (T)

Who?

Terry Cousin (CB)

THANK GOD. Possibly my least favorite Brown ever.

Kevin Shaffer (RT)

Despite an absolutely awful year, many were still upset when

Shaffer was cut due to the fact that he refused to reduce his cap number. This is somewhat justifiable - why create a hole where there wasn't one before?

However, someone of Shaffer's caliber can be replaced. It's not like they released Joe Thomas.

Whether their Free Agent acquisitions are adequate replacements is yet to be seen, but I just can't find it in my soul to weep tears of remorse for the loss Kevin Shaffer.

Joe Jurevicius (WR)

It sucks that JJ got cut. I was hoping for him to make the comeback from multiple surgeries to clean out his knee and fend off the ever-present Staph. I felt that the Browns owed him a little bit since he got the infection on their watch, at their Clinic.

However, there is no proof that JJ got the Staph from the Clinic, and I'm more than sure that the Browns didn't want him to get the infection any more than he did.

Basically, Joe's knee is probably shot. The powers that be felt that he wouldn't be able to live up to his contract number and asked him to take a pay cut to the veteran minimum.

Joe said no.

This tells me several things: 1) the Browns were trying, in their own dysfunctional way, to extend an olive branch to Joe by even bothering to offer him a contract at all, 2) the Browns couldn't ask Ryan Tucker to take a pay cut and then let Joe just say no to his, 3) if playing for the Browns was so important to JJ, then he could've easily accepted the veteran minimum, which is no small sum.

The Browns didn't handle this in a fan friendly way, but they probably did make the right decision.

I think a lot of the consternation about the Jurevicius release has to do not with his abilities (or lack thereof at this point), but with the fact that he's a local kid.

Personally, I don't get that one. Who cares if he's from Ohio? I n addition to the Buckeye State, I've lived in New York, Florida, and California, and I can safely say that people are pretty much

the same all over, and there are just as many assholes in Ohio as there is anywhere else.

"*He's one of us*?" How do you know? Do you know Joe? According to that logic, the guy right down the street from me with the huge Dixie flag and the '79 Gremlin parked in the front yard and the Triple H bumper sticker is "one of us".

Not to me, he ain't.

That dude is as foreign to me as some guy from Uzbekistan.

Joe Jurevicius is a multi-millionaire professional athlete. I cannot identify with that.

His proclaimed love for the Browns has been well documented, but Joe had several chances to come back to Cleveland before he did, and took the money elsewhere.

Even when coming back to NE Ohio, he was well compensated to do so.

And he was just given an opportunity to stay at a lesser price, to retire a Brown, but chose not to take the offer.

Maybe his pride was hurt, or he wanted to finish his career with a winner... I'm sure he felt he had a good reason. Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.

I've made no secret that I'm a Football Socialist. Team comes first. Players come and players go - team endures.

I don't know the players - even Joey J - any better than I know Margaret Thatcher.

If I did, my opinion might change, but I will not take up the case of strangers who temporarily don the Brown and Orange versus the Team itself.

There's no doubt the Browns handled his release somewhat ham-handedly. But fans seem to think that Joey J - and themselves - *deserve* something more than they're getting.

Quoth the Great Clint : *Deserve's got nothing to do with it.*

How does a team replace their losses? One way is through the art of Free Agency. The Browns foray into the Free Agent market this year has been... how do I say it?... lackluster.

Here's whom they picked up.

Free Agent Signees:

Hank Poteat (CB)

Exit Terry Cousin, enter Hank Poteat. If he's not an upgrade to Cousin, he should just shoot himself right now.

Nothing but a depth signing.

Corey Ivy (CB)

The real top candidate for the Nickel Corner spot. Should also not be considered for a starting role.

David Bowens (LB)

Nice depth at LB, but is unlikely to have a shot at starting.

Eric Barton (LB)

Now, Barton might start. He's an effective Middle Linebacker - I have to believe he's an upgrade over Andra Davis.

He's older (31), so I can't imagine that he's a long-term solution, but Free Agent signings rarely are.

Basically, they give the Browns flexibility if they decide to go a direction other than LB in their first 3 picks.

CJ Mosley (DT)

Mosley might have a shot to start too. I haven't watched enough Jets football to know if he's better than Robaire Smith or not, but he'll get his chance, and if he outperforms Robaire, more power to him.

John St. Clair (T)

This is apparently the replacement for Kevin Shaffer. He too is older (32), and obviously a stop-gap, but then again so was Shaffer.

Floyd Womack (G)

Gotta love Porkchop. Will he start at RG ahead of Rex Hadnot? Who knows? I'd love for him to be an upgrade at that position, but Tucker will probably get a good shot at RG as well.

No matter what happens, I think we have to believe the RG position will be more solid in 2009.

Robert Royal (TE)

This signing is uninteresting to me. He's here to replace Dinkins, not Winslow. Royal's not going to be the pass catcher that Winslow was.

I have to think the Browns are hoping that the combination of

Steve Heiden and Martin Rucker will be.

Noah Herron (RB)

Erase his name and insert the name Jason Wright and you wouldn't even notice.

Mike Adams (S)

At this point, I think this was a good re-sign, since Adams is a decent backup, and there is a gaping, yawning chasm without a bottom at Safety.

5 of these guys are from the Jets (Poteat, Bowens, Barton, Mosley, Herron). Should we find it odd that the Browns have signed so many Jets? I don't. These are guys that Mangini knows.

They are depth guys, not starters.

When a person with power - a general, a president, a CEO, etc. - takes control of their new job, they generally bring with them a couple people that they know and trust.

Mangini is simply bringing with him the ones he can.

I'm sure, given the opportunity, there'd be a whole lot more Jets he'd like to bring to Cleveland.

This is a complete non-issue.

Another non-issue is the lack of brand name Free Agent signings. The big names always go in the first few days, and they get beaucoup bucks. A synonym for that is "overpaid". There are very few Free Agents that I wanted that signed for reasonable contracts.

Bad teams break the bank on Free Agents.

Good teams are judicious and build through the draft.

Bad teams have to overpay for quality Free Agents and dole out ridiculous chunks of cash for their high draft picks. If a few of their pricey acquisitions go awry, then they are saddled with bad contracts and questionable talent.

Eventually, that catches up to the powers that be, they get

replaced, and new guys come in, burning down the house and bitching about the baggage left behind by the previous tenants.

In order to build the team back up, they are forced to overpay for quality Free Agents and dole out ridiculous chunks of cash for their high draft picks.

Rinse. Repeat. Ad nauseum.

At least we can say that Mangini & Kokinis don't appear to be falling into this trap. I'm not sure exactly what their Plan is, but at least it's something different. So, for now, I don't have an issue with that either.

What IS an issue is that the Browns have lost several Free Agents that they did want and bid on.

The Fish That Got Away:

Jabari Greer (CB) - Signed by the New Orleans Saints

Greer is the most painful loss for yours truly, since he's a starting caliber Corner and could've moved Brandon McDonald to the Nickel. He apparently took comparable money to go to New Orleans instead. One can only assume that he did that because he felt the Saints were closer to winning now. I can't say I find a flaw in that theory.

Heath Farwell (LB) - Re-signed by the Minnesota Vikings

Farwell would've been a nice addition to the Linebacking corps, but, when it was determined that all things were equal, he gave his team the benefit of the doubt.

Abram Elam (S) - Re-signed by the New York Jets

This one aches too. Elam would've been the de facto replacement for Sean Jones. But he was a Restricted Free Agent, and New York - at the last moment - decided to match.

So that Safety position is still a gaping, yawning chasm without a bottom.

Bad teams have to overpay for quality Free Agents and dole out ridiculous chunks of cash for their high draft picks. There's two edges to that sword.

It should also be noted that the impending NFL labor crisis is absolutely affecting the Free Agent market. Lots of one year deals have been done in the anticipation of an uncapped year in 2010. Many players want to be Free Agents going into next March, banking on big paydays from fool teams like Washington that want to try and buy themselves a one-year championship.

2009 will have a feel of impermanence for many teams.

And please, NFL, if you do one thing in the new CBA, get that Rookie salary scale done. Like the one they have in the NBA, the scale that says " *You were picked here, here's how much money you get, period, end of story, shut the hell up Rook and get your ass in camp* ."

I don't care if you have to implement a lockout to do it - get it done. Make it so those high draft picks help the bad teams again, instead of hamstringing them with ungodly contracts and holdouts.

OK, so we've still got some holes left, eh? *Like swiss frickin' cheese* , you say. A nd I have to agree.

2009 WILL NOT be pretty. Accept it now before it destroys you.

The holes are as follows in no particular order: Right Tackle, Right Guard, Center, Running Back, Wide Receiver, Cornerback, Safety, Outside Linebacker, Inside Linebacker, Defensive Tackle, and depth all over the damn place.

Those can't all be filled by one draft. This team will not be ready to compete until 2010 at the earliest.

The Browns have the # 5, # 36, and # 50 overall picks in the

draft. The odds of any draft pick after those making a significant impact in 2009 is low, so really there will be only 3 selections (currently) to fill all those holes. They'll need more if they want to improve.

Obviously, there's DA. Derek Anderson's bonus has been paid - he is now a tradeable commodity. He has some value to the Browns, but I'd like to see a low 2nd Rounder or high 3rd Rounder instead.

That would increase the number of potentially starter-quality draft picks to 4.

Then there is the discussion that Braylon Edwards will be dealt. This is akin to Offensive suicide, but it might be a long-term necessity. It's no secret that Braylon is unhappy in Cleveland - the mean ol' fans aren't nice when he drops the ball. This is the last year on his contract.

He's probably eyeing that uncapped 2010 year like everyone else is.

If he is dead-set on exploring Free Agency next season instead of signing an extension, the only thing the Browns can do to keep him is to Franchise him.

Do you think Braylon Edwards is worth the Franchise Tag? That might be about $10 mil.

So what, you say. *2010 will be uncapped unless they agree to a new CBA.* *Randy Lerner is super-rich.* *He can just pay for it and like it.*

Valid. And, on top of that, if 2010 is uncapped, then the current CBA states that players don't become Unrestricted Free Agents until after 6 years instead of 4.

Braylon will be entering his 6th year in 2010, so he would still be Restricted in an uncapped year, meaning the Browns would be able to easily keep him for much cheaper than a Franchise tag, or lose him with 1st

Round compensation.

The only caveat to that is that there is no guarantee that 2010 will be uncapped. If the players and the owners reach a new agreement before that, then all those loopholes to keep Braylon would evaporate back to an ugly Franchise tag.

If Edwards is traded, it should be for nothing less than a 1st Round pick. He is not without talent. If he ever learns to catch, he'll be a great receiver.

But trading Edwards absolutely necessitates the drafting of Michael Crabtree with the 5th overall pick, since there is absolute zero behind Braylon at WR at this point, especially seeing as Donte Stallworth will probably soon be spending some time in a different kind of orange uniform.

So it all comes down to this: Would you rather have Braylon Edwards for a year or two and the # 5 overall pick?

Or would you rather have Michael Crabtree for 5 years and, say, the # 20 overall pick?

It's not an easy choice. If you held a power drill to my head, I guess I'd have to choose Crabtree and # 20. Br aylon Edwards is not a Top 10 WR.

I think Crabtree will be.

Plus, Crabtree doesn't seem like he'd be the same kind of unmitigated dumbass that Braylon proved to be. Most people believe that excessive physical punishment of kids is child

abuse, but Edwards is a clear-cut case of someone that didn't get beaten *enough*.

That brings us to the draft. That's the big question - Who should the Browns take at # 5?

Can't F that up. You do, you're toast. Just one blunder in the Top 10 of the draft and you'll be a regular at soup kitchens.

Obviously, if you can trade down, you look to do that. Trading down is not easy, however. You need a partner, and nobody wants those Top 10 picks.

Plenty of good players can be had later on, and you don't have to pay them like they work for AIG.

Very few teams just HAVE to have that one guy so much that they will pay both the price to move up and the price to sign the bastard.

So throw "trade down" out the window as an unlikely option.

Well, if the Browns trade Braylon Edwards, then I'd say the # 5 pick almost HAS to be Crabtree (assuming he's there). Otherwise, I think Crabtree is a luxury you can't afford, although I'm not gonna scream bloody murder should they go out on a limb and pick him.

If the Browns keep Braylon, then my first choice would be Aaron Curry. He probably won't be a Hall of Famer, but he's solid and he's not making a positional change.

He's safe.

Assuming Curry is gone, which many people are doing, then you have the choice between one of the following: Jason Smith (OT, Baylor), Eugene Monroe (OT, Virginia), Andre Smith (OT, Alabama), Malcolm Jenkins (S/CB, Ohio State), Brian Orakpo (DE/OLB, Texas), Everette Brown (DE/OLB, Florida State), Chris Wells (RB, Ohio State), B.J. Raji (DT, Boston College).

Let's weed that out. I don't think you draft Jenkins at # 5, since most experts are

projecting him as an NFL Safety rather than a Corner. Now, Safety might actually be the greater need for the Browns at this point, but you don't use a pick that high on a guy who has to convert positions.

We just can't afford the big gamble.

And so now you know where I stand on Orakpo and Brown. Both have a lot of upside and potential. Both could be huge busts transitioning to 3-4 OLB from college Defensive End. I don't know if the risk is worth taking for a team that has so many holes.

Beanie Wells would be a much safer pick if it weren't for injury propensity. And the fact that good Running Backs can definitely still be had

in the 2nd Round. You only take a RB that high if he's a LaDainian Tomlinson or an Adrian Peterson.

Beanie is not an LT or an AP.

BJ Raji really interests me. You can't have enough good Linemen - Defensive or Offensive, and with him in there spelling Shaun Rogers at the Nose and playing alongside him at Tackle, there should be a lot more push up the middle than we've seen for quite some time in Cleveland.

Right Tackle has become a need, and Offensive Linemen are generally safe picks.

They also seem to last a long time.

If you take either of the Smiths or Monroe, you're filling a hole that probably won't need to be addressed again for many a moon.

So the Hiko Wish List goes like this:

Tally Ho! This Dude Should Really Make A Difference Right Away
- Curry, Crabtree, one of the Tackles, BJ Raji.

Yer Rollin' The Bones, Better Be Right Or It's Your Arse - Orakpo, Brown, Jenkins. A nd throw in Rey Maualuga for good measure.

Awwwwww, Man! What The Flock? - Beanie Wells.

I'm Goin' To Get My Crossbow - Matthew Stafford, Mark Sanchez.

I've heard some complaints that it appears the Mangini & Kokinis are undertaking a complete overhaul of the team, and all that was needed was a tweaking of a team that was 10-6 in 2007.

Let me be plain on this: That 10-6 team was NOT a 10-6 team.

That was a mirage.

That was a team winning a bunch of close games against a schedule loaded with bad teams.

That was a team who managed only 1 of its 10 victories against a team with a winning record.

Nor was the 2008 team a 4-12 team. They probably would've/should've won a couple more games had they not been reduced to trotting out the Ken Dorsey/Bruce Gradkowski show.

The 2007 and 2008 Browns are about what the average of the two seasons came to: 7-9.

There are different kinds of 7-9 teams. The re are 7-9 teams with lots of young talent that just need time to get over the hump.

And then there are 7-9 teams with significant holes all over the place and questions galore surrounding key positions such as QB.

The latter 7-9 team is a squad that will never get you to the Promised Land.

If dismantling a mediocre team is what is required to get to the Promised Land, then that's what you do. If it is necessary that you take a step backward to take two steps forward, then that's what you do.

I may or may not agree - what I think is irrelevant. What matters is what the boys making the decisions think. And their actions speak louder than words: this team, comprised as it was, was not going to contend for any trophies anytime soon.

We shall see. It's a hard path they've chosen for themselves. They could be completely right about this and still fail.

They have to first be correct that the team needs an overhaul (an opinion shared by many in the NFL world), then make the proper decisions to build it back up again.

Basically, they need to successfully do what every other regime before them has tried to do and failed.

Yes, if they look around them, they can see the Road to Hell is paved with their predecessor's good intentions - the same good intentions they have.

Good luck, Team Mankinis. You'll need a barge full of it to survive.