Three weeks until the NFL Draft. And the Browns continue to be tied to Texas Longhorns DE/OLB Brian Orakpo. There were mixed opinions on Orakpo's performance at his recent Pro Day, and in this week's Outsider, Hiko tells us why Orakpo terrifies him as the #5 overall selection in the draft. Hiko also takes some time to hit on the Brady Rule, potentially expanding the NFL season to 18 games, the Browns QB controversy, and the slow death the Plain Dealer is dying and their post-Mangini Browns coverage.

A View From The Cheap Seats **3 Weeks Until The Draft**

Last week, the powers that be met in Dana Point, CA, for the annual Owner's Meeting to discuss rule and policy changes for the upcoming season and possibly into the next round of Collective Bargaining Agreement negotiations. I'll touch on some of the results/topics.

The Brady Rule.

In order to avoid the type of season-ending injury that Tom Brady suffered last year, the NFL has now made it illegal for Defenders who are knocked to the ground to lunge at a Quarterback's legs in order to try and tackle them.

If you are saying to yourself "*What the Fiddle*?", then you are not alone.

So, basically, if a rusher is knocked to the ground, he is essentially out of the play, unless he can pop back up (always difficult to do with a blocker waiting for you) and chase the QB down. QB's these days are bigger, stronger, and faster than ever before, yet you can only tackle them from an area running roughly from the shoulders to mid-thigh.

I understand the NFL trying to protect their most valuable assets, namely the star Quarterbacks. I do. But this is football. Stars help increase the popularity of football, but the real star is football itself.

If you start watering the product down to a point where the QB is essentially wearing a pink "no touch" jersey, then maybe this is the time that those renegade richies out there can finally succeed with an XFL2.

If the NFL is so worried about the health of its Quarterbacks, then I propose another rule, one which will also help even out the unfairness of these new Quarterback-tackling rules that have come into existence: Quarterbacks are no longer allowed to run past the line of scrimmage.

If you don't want the Quarterbacks tackled like a Running Back, then don't let them run like a Running Back.

Lots of QB injuries happen on runs. And how can you ask a Defender on the ground not to tackle a QB by any means necessary if not tackling the QB results in a 20 yard scramble? Either tackle the guy for a 15 yard penalty or give up a possibly even bigger play.

It's the Devil's choice.

It's a slippery slope you go down when you start putting certain players/positions on a pedestal. Make QB's wear full body armor if you have to, just don't water down the sport I love.

Developmental League

With the protracted death of NFL Europe, professional football is without a developmental league (unless you count Arena Football). I have been a proponent for minor league football for a long time, and would love to see a viable alternative for players not-quite-ready-for-prime-time.

I've heard that the NFL's theory is to run its developmental league in the Spring and Summer, but I don't like that idea, since having players go 12 months a year is not really helping them.

What I propose is a true minor league system. Each team has a minor league team that plays in a smaller venue near the home city at the same time every Fall.

For instance, the Browns' minor league team could play in Akron, the Bengals' minor league team could play in Dayton, the Ravens in Annapolis, the Steelers in Altoona, etc.

They could play at existing college stadiums, working around those college's schedules.

They could play on Thursday nights, Friday nights, Saturday nights... any day but Sunday.

This way, young players could truly develop during the NFL season, giving them the same offseason and access to OTA's and minicamps as the vets. The problem with players going to NFL Europe was always the fact that they were absent from all the offseason training, the installation of the packages and

schemes, and the positional competition.

It was almost a disadvantage to them to go over the pond.

If teams had multiple players go down, they could call up players from the minor league team rather than off the streets. More players would be employed, and they would be employed longer. They wouldn't get paid like the NFL players, but at least they would be getting paid to do what they love.

And what a fertile developmental ground for coaches, too. When NFL jobs opened up, you can guarantee that successful minor league coaches would be amongst the first interviewed.

Wouldn't you watch that? I would, especially if they slapped minor league ticket prices on it. Hell, some seasons, I'd probably much rather watch the young developmental players than the real Browns. At least there's some hope for the future with the minor league team.

Not to mention that it would help cement the fan base. I don't know about where you live, but here in Akron the population of Steeler bandwagon fans is shooting through the proverbial roof.

If there were a Browns Jr. team playing on the Zips new field, however, some of the locals here might be more hesitant to jump to the black n yella.

Or, if my minor league system doesn't work, then the NFL can always adopt NFL Mexico. I once started a script for the antics of that fictitious league. The poster has a shot of tequila and a football shaped lemon, complete with laces.

Expanding the NFL Season to 17 or 18 games

NO! Please God, don't eliminate Preseason games and replace them with Regular Season games! Ack! The horror!

I don't mind Preseason games as much as most people do, but then again, I'm not a season ticket holder. However, I'm never against more meaningful NFL games or a longer season. Knocking down the Preseason to only 2 games severely hampers the ability of young players to make a significant enough impression to win roster spots, but that's where my minor league proposal would come in so handy.

If the NFL goes to 17 games, then, in order to avoid a discrepancy between the number of home and away games, each team play one game a year in a neutral venue, such as Mexico, Canada, non-NFL cities such as Los Angeles and Detroit, and even the occasional European city, such as London, Dublin, Berlin, and Amsterdam.

Actually, scratch that last. NFL players in Amsterdam? You wouldn't be able to field a team the following week.

Rookie Salary Cap

The media did not disclose that this was discussed at the owner's meetings, but I can guarantee it was talked about behind closed doors. Something like:

"*Hey, guys, WHEN we lock out the players and force down their throats whatever we want to because we can because DirecTV is giving us a BILLION dollars a year, we definitely need to have a Rookie Salary Cap* ."

"*Hear hear!* *Three cheers for he who just spoke thusly*!"

If breaking the Player's Union is what is required to get the Rookie Salary Cap done, then so be it. It has to happen. It makes too much sense for it not to happen, and it helps both sides.

Why try to prop up a system in which proven veteran players get cut to make cap room to sign rookies to contracts bigger than anyone else on the team?

The teams get screwed by holdouts and the large guaranteed sums of money paid to guys who most likely will never live up to the paper they sign. Bad teams stay bad because they get stuck with high picks and outrageous contracts that kill their cap.

The veteran players get screwed by getting tossed to the curb for younger players solely because the young players are too expensive not to play, whether they deserve to start or not.

The young lowly-drafted/undrafted players get screwed because they will never get an equal opportunity against the highly-drafted expensive players.

And even the highly drafted rookies get screwed because of the enormous and unreasonable pressure that they'll be put under to immediately live up to their gargantuan and ridiculous contracts.

It's bad business all around. I can watch a couple months of replacement football if it gets the current rookie contract abomination aborted.

Overtime

They discussed making changes to the Overtime rules, but it never came to fruition. Many players were against it because they did not want to lengthen the game and increase their potential for injury. *Keep Sudden Death* was the majority credo.

Granted, a fair point, but it does not address the holes of the current system. There is little doubt that the team winning the coin toss has an unfair advantage, and there is little excitement in a closely contested game ending with a 35 yard Field Goal on 3rd Down.

My proposition is thus - play a 5 minute period Overtime period. Generally, there is a good chance that Sudden Death OT is gonna go 5 minutes anyway, so it's not like the players will be out there significantly longer.

Plus, the last 5 minutes of a football game are always the most exciting, and it gives both teams a shot to have the ball (unless one team can hold the ball for all 5 minutes and score, which would be difficult to do with the Timeouts received in the OT period).

If the 1st OT period ends in a tie, then have a 2nd 5 minute OT (10 minutes of extra football, which happens in Sudden Death OT all the time). If that one ends in a tie too, then it's a tie.

Even Donovan McNabb would understand that system.

The Fall of the House of Plain Dealer

Once upon a time, the Plain Dealer was a respectable newspaper. Reporters Tony Grossi and Mary Kay Cabot provided insider information with mostly objective analysis.

Bill Livingston and Bud Shaw chipped in an insightful article once and a while, and, with the addition of Terry Pluto, the PD looked to have a powerful array of Browns writers.

Ah, how the mighty have fallen.

Only Pluto keeps the ship from sinking faster than cow made of lead. Grossi is still trying to recover from the apoplectic hissy-fit he suffered when he discovered that he would have to cover another tight-lipped drab coaching/front office duo a la the 90's Bellichick regime. Mary Kay Cabot has mysteriously disappeared. Livingston and Shaw's opinions have largely been negated as useless due to the proliferation of local sports websites, blogs, and message boards - nothing they say hasn't been said a million times

before (and better).

Take this blurb from a recent PD column by Livingston about keeping Braylon Edwards:

"*Inconsistency is his dominant characteristic. He set a franchise record for touchdown catches and yardage in 2007, then -- boom goes the dynamite -- led the NFL in dropped passes in 2008.*

Now the new Browns regime is listening to offers for him, and the hue and cry among fans here in "North Columbus" is to get rid of the Michigan stiff."

There are many arguments and counter-arguments to the trade-Braylon/don't-trade-Braylon question that Livingston could've brought up. One of them is NOT where he went to school. I thought the only person dumb enough to think that Braylon's popularity (or lack thereof) had anything to do with him going to Michigan was Braylon himself.

Mr. Livingston, I apologize for the name-calling. I respect how long you've been doing your job, and I respect some of the

work you've done in the past.

But, whether I agree with you or not about keeping Braylon, fans wanting to trade Edwards because of where he went to school is just a horrible take.

North Columbus?

Please.

That's not even an effort.

It's very simple - the potential Braylon trade goes like this:

Cons

**If we trade Braylon Edwards, we have nothing at Wide Receiver. We'll be left with Syndric Steptoe, David Patton, Josh Cribbs, Paul Hubbard, and Lance Leggett. Yipes!

**Braylon is very talented, and when he's on, he's very very good.

**In all probability, the 2010 season will be uncapped and Braylon will be a Restricted Free Agent due to the terms of the existing CBA (years served to earn Unrestricted Free Agency will go from 4 to 6, and Braylon will only have 5 years served).

**Trading Edwards would likely mean the Browns would have to spend their # 5 overall pick on Michael Crabtree.

**Edwards has given generously to local charities.

Pros

**Braylon is not an elite receiver, yet he will demand an elite receiver contract.

**When Braylon's off, he's very very bad. I don't just mean the drops, which are bad enough.

I'm talking about missing blocks, half-assing patterns (which leads to picks), and getting nailed with penalties.

**The Browns should be able to recoup a 1st Round pick for him, which would help them in shoring up their depleted roster.

**The Browns will have a very hard time keeping him beyond 2010. If the owners and players get to a new CBA in time, then the uncapped year won't happen, and the Browns will have a very hard time keeping him beyond 2009. Don't let him walk for free.

**Crabtree might very well be better than Edwards.

**Edwards is a whiny selfish bee-otch that threatens to take away his local charities when the fans don't love him as much as he loves him.

**Oh, and he's stupid enough to believe that the fans boo his drops because he's from Michigan. Only someone from Michigan could be that dim-witted (that's what we call "irony"... for those of you from Michigan).

In the end: if you keep Braylon, then you keep the # 5 overall. If you trade Braylon for a 1st Round pick in the 20's, then you almost have to draft Crabtree at # 5 to replace Braylon.

So it's either Braylon and # 5... or Crabtree and # 20-ish.

The question really then comes down to *Do you believe that Michael Crabtree for the next 5 years is better than Braylon Edwards for the next 2*
?

If Crabtree and Edwards are a wash, all you've really done is trade a # 5 overall pick for a pick in the 20's, which, last time I checked, ain't considered a good trade.

But, if Crabtree makes those 3rd Down catches that Braylon drops, if he runs those slant routes sharply and doesn't allow his Defender to jump them and

pick the pass, if he doesn't get nailed for False Starts and Blocks in the Back nearly every goddam game...

And, since no one can know that answer, the debate will rage on.

The Fall of the House of Plain Dealer, Part Deux

Tony Grossi caught up with Browns President Mike Keenan (he who no one knew existed prior to introducing Eric Mangini as Head

Coach) at the Owner's Meetings last week, registering the rare "interview with a random non-personnel related front office type ".

And, of course, he asked Keenan the same tired questions he's been asking everyone else, right down to the pointless " *are you worried the Browns are signing so many Jets* " doozie.

Sigh. Not only is interviewing a suit like Keenan mostly useless, but the questions were mostly slanted to try and serve Grossi's wearisome agenda. In order to spice up the interview, I will now answer Grossi's questions the way Keenan *should* have answered them:

Question: The Browns recently laid off about 18 employees, and Crain's Cleveland Business reported 30 stadium suite leases are up. There's also talk of a few major sponsorship deals expiring. What's the state of the team economically right now?

Hiko: *Maybe those employees were laid off for economic reasons, maybe they were laid off for other reasons which we didn't feel were appropriate to disclose to you. In the end, the Browns are an NFL team.*

DirecTV just re-upped the NFL Package for a billion dollars a year.

I think we'll be all right.

Q: Are the economics more pressing right now

than at any time since the franchise's rebirth in 1999?

Hiko: *I guess so. Instead of making tons and tons of money, we're just making tons.*

But we know if we don't stop this Culture of Blow that the stadium will be emptier than Art Modell's soul come November.

Q: How do you reconcile those economic hardships with investing so much money ($500,000 to $2 million) into the building on improvements that Mangini has asked for?

Hiko: *Businesses make improvements to their facilities all the time. I'm not sure why it's such a big deal to you.*

Why don't you walk on down to Key Bank and ask them why they just cycled out all their computers?

Oh, right, because businesses make improvements to their facilities all the time.

Q: How much does the team's losing affect the economics? In other words, are the corporate community and the fans being turned off by the losing?

Hiko: *No, they like the losing*. *Of course they're turned off by the losing!*

Who wouldn't be?

It's not like we're losing on purpose.

We want to win as much as you want us to win.

It's frustrating to us too.

Some days I come home and just kick the cat all around the kitchen because I'm so damn pissed off and the cat got on the counter and knocked over the toaster and his dirty little paws have left litter germs all over the place and I've got to spray OxyClean all over the place... actually, sorry, I don't remember what the question was.

Q: How urgent is it, then, for this new regime to turn this thing around to keep fans from getting further disenchanted?

Hiko: *Dude. Every season, we feel the*

urgency to win. EVERY season.

Once again, it's not as if we WANT to lose.

It's not fun to suck.

We'll just keep trying our hardest to get this thing turned around.

Believe me, losing year after year has a huge effect on our lives too.

If the Browns fail, the fans get disenchanted, but we get fired.

Not only do I love the Browns, but I love my paycheck, and that might be the greatest motivation of all.

Q: There's a prevalent feeling that Lerner will sell the team if this new regime doesn't work

out. What's his state of mind about this new regime?

Hiko (rolling eyes): *Good question. He hired them thinking how much fun it would be to watch them fail.*

Most successful businessmen follow that model - hire someone who you think will be a complete disaster, piss off the stockholders, destroy the product.

He can't wait for the losing to begin.

Q: You were involved in the search process for a new coach and GM. Why was there such a suddenness in naming Mangini as coach when no other team pursued him?

Hiko: *Well, one could theorize that no other team pursued Mangini because of our "suddenness" in naming him, but that would make sense. So the only thing I can think of is that Randy and I were overly eager to commence losing.*

Q: There's a perception the Browns are not media-friendly and I would say, as a result, not fan-friendly. The culture that Mangini brings to limit the information flow is well known. Is your team fan-friendly?

Hiko: *You would say? Strange how that theory fits your agenda.*

As far as being fan-friendly, we're trying our damnedest to win, which is the most

fan-friendly aspect of any sporting franchise. If the fans also feel that they need inside organizational information, then they should probably try to join the organization, because the current regime feels that making vital information public knowledge is not what is best to help the team turn around its losing ways.

And that, understandably, filters down to you guys in the media.

You have to understand that most football guys see the media as nosy idiots, and they don't have a ton of respect for them. Now, we understand that dealing with the media is a - albeit annoying - part of the job.

Some coaches have a greater tolerance for the media - they take certain shots and vitamins ahead of time.

Some have less tolerance.

I'm trying to tolerate you right now, and I think I'm doing a pretty good job.

Q: Brady Quinn's name in trade rumors elicits tons of responses. One thing Lerner said in November was he hoped the team would commit to one quarterback going forward. Do you guys feel that's necessary?

Hiko: *Yes, at some point, we'll have to commit to a Quarterback.*

Q: Are you or Lerner concerned with this influx of Jets players (four signed so far)?

Hiko: *Another great question! Yes, we're very concerned. Ra ndy told me just the other day that if we sign one more damn Jet, that he's going to fire some more employees and cancel Arbor Day.*

It makes no sense for a coach to bring in reserve players that know his system and whom he trusts.

There is an un-written rule in football that all your Free Agents must come from different teams.

Signing a whole bunch of players just because Mangini knows them and is familiar with their abilities is unacceptable.

Looks Like Tarzan, Plays Like ?

Brian Orakpo had his Pro Day workout on March 25th. The initial reaction I heard from the Pro Day was very positive, which is good since the Browns have shown an increased amount of interest in him, and many people have theorized he will go to Cleveland at # 5.

ESPN's Todd McShay waxed poetic about Orakpo's athleticism, and NFL.com's Gil Brandt had this to say :

"*Orakpo did not disappoint, posting a 10-foot, 10-inch broad jump, a time of 4.45 in the short shuttle and 7.26 in the*

three-cone drill. Orakpo held the rest of his numbers from the Combine.

I think the consensus on Orakpo is very positive. The one question mark on him is that he's one of those guys that appears to play hard 90 percent of the time, but takes a vacation the other 10 percent. But when you're a pass-rusher in 110-degree temperatures it's hard to go full speed all the time. The weather here in the south is detrimental because these players get tired from constantly rushing the passer in the heat and humidity."

But then I read a blurb on Pro Football Talk (yes, I know, hardly a credible source 100%

of the time, but if you swing at enough pitches, every once in a while you'll make contact).

The blurb said this:

"*Earlier in the day, NFL.com's Gil Brandt offered up a glowing review of Brian Orakpo's Pro Day workout.*

But not everyone feels that way.

Per one league source, some scouts viewed the linebacker/defensive end's workout as "brutal."

According to the source, Orakpo is regarded by some as having "great athletic abilities but bad football skills."

It's prompting some to question whether Orakpo merits even a first-round pick.

If this sounds familiar, it should. There's a chance that Orakpo could be the latest in a line of "looks like Tarzan, plays like Jane" players, including past first-rounders like Vernon Gholston and Mike Mamula.

(Then there's Alabama's Andre Smith, who as one reader pointed out after Smith's recent shirtless sprint "plays like Tarzan, looks like Jane.")

Even Gil Brandt, who is regarded by many as having a bias in favor of Texas football, acknowledges that Orakpo is "one of those guys that appears to play hard 90 percent of the time, but takes a vacation the other 10 percent."

It's the kind of attitude that could put a coach or a G.M. on vacation 100 percent of the time if they pick Orakpo, and if he doesn't deliver."

OK, when you put "*looks like Tarzan, plays like Jane* " (Courtney Brown) together in an article with every detractor's evidence that Mangini probably made a gargantuan error with his

last high draft pick (Vernon Gholston), it gives me the Heebie-Jeebies.

Bah!

Did you feel a shiver shoot up your spine too?

I am on record as being scared shitless of Brian Orakpo. From what I've seen, I even like Everette Brown better, and he'd be the same kind of shot-in-the-dark transitional DE-to-OLB that Orakpo is.

Obviously, Linebackers and pass rush are huge needs for the Browns. But, Orakpo? Ye Gods, if you take him, you'd better be

right.

Because if Brian Orakpo turns out to be Courtney Gholston, then, Mangini, you might as well shoot yourself now.

Start with the foot, then the knee, then the thigh, and work your way - slowly - to the head.

Say It Ain't So

So, Mangini says there will be an open

competition for starting QB.

You buy that?

Maybe - just maybe - he's trying to pump up the aforementioned Quarterbacks' trade value?

I can't imagine that Derek Anderson has a Slurpee's chance in Hell of being the starter come Opening Day. Mangini has to have seen the tape by now.

Sure, DA can be enticing when he's on, but that ain't often enough to justify his starting at QB.

But Mangini's probably hoping that some GM out there has seen less tape, or is more intoxicated with the big arm, or is more desperate, thus forking over the low 2nd

or high 3rd

for Mr. Anderson.

That being said, if the Browns can't manage to trade DA, then I'm fine with the ol' QB competition.

It's true - we don't know yet what we have in Brady Quinn. But we do know

what we have in Derek Anderson.

And if Quinn can't beat out Anderson, then we probably don't have a QB at all.

But if BQ is truly greater than DA, then he will win the QB competition. And if DA wins it, we'll get to see one of two things:

•1. DA takes to the coaching and system of the new regime and improves drastically into a viable NFL QB.

•2. We'll at least finally know we have NO QB on the roster worthy of being a viable NFL starter, and we'll need to get one.

Yes, technically, a QB competition would be annoying beyond comprehension, but at least it would give media types something to talk about other than renovations and Jet proliferation.

There. Hopefully that was in line with my new doctrine: *Fair and Unbalanced* .

Sincerely,

The Shill