As we get set to enter into season #11 since their return from the Art Modell-imposed purgatory, the Browns have made just one playoff appearance and have yet to win a single playoff game. As it is, expectations surrounding it still remain nearly as humble as they did when the team took the field in 1999. Fans aren't so much clamoring for wins as they are praying that the team can just eliminate the number of delay-of-game penalties it gets assessed after coming out of a time out. In his latest, Gary takes a look at the state of the franchise as the season approaches.

If the Cleveland Browns were anything but a professional sports franchise, it likely would have been shut down by now. Most companies couldn't stay in business by repeatedly selling defective products and no performer could ever stay in that line of work without at least a few successes.

As the team enters its 11th season since its return from the Art Modell-imposed purgatory, the Browns have had less success than any of the acts managed by Woody Allen's character in "Broadway Danny Rose." As it is, expectations surrounding it still remain nearly as humble as they did when the team took the field in 1999. Fans aren't so much clamoring for wins as they are praying that the team can just eliminate the number of delay-of-game penalties it gets assessed after coming out of a time out.

Ten years is a fair amount of time to measure anyone's progress. Bruce Springsteen released "Born to Run" in 1975 and 10 years later released "Born in the USA." That's a pretty remarkable accomplishment and he's just one guy. If you want to contrast it further with the Browns, consider that in 1995 Springsteen released "The Ghost of Tom Joad" and 10 years after that released "Devils and Dust." Over a 30-year period, his growth as a songwriter and a performer is astounding, from characters that started out as wide-eyed innocents to become family men with responsibilities, beaten down by every day reality but still finding a little bit of hope in their daily lives.

Can you imagine if the Browns could just have made the leap that Springsteen made from "Born to Run" to "Born in the USA" in their last 10 years? No one would be talking about television blackouts and fans wouldn't be so keenly focused on such trivial matters as who the starting quarterback is going to be on Sunday against the Minnesota Vikings. But focused they are because, frankly, this team and this franchise has given back so little that we'll take our debates and concerns from wherever they arise.

It didn't have to be this way. The NFL didn't do the Browns any favors in helping them get out of the gate in 1999, but so much has happened since then as to render those problems meaningless today. The constant here has been the ownership of the Lerner family. It has had more than enough time to put together an organization with executives that are not only classy but are good at their jobs. Instead they've repeatedly put their trust in the wrong people for the wrong reasons. For good measure, Randy Lerner now and Al Lerner then have been the least accountable owners in this history of Cleveland sports.

Ted Stepien may have been the biggest buffoon to ever own a team but he at least was accountable. He was front and center leading the parade for the 3-ring circus over which he presided. When it all fell apart, which it was bound to, he was forced out. No such luck with the Lerners. One gets the sense that Randy Lerner is going to hold on to this franchise almost out of spite and there isn't a damn thing anyone can do about it, not Roger Goodell, not his fellow owners and certainly not the fans.

Thus we're left with where we are at today. The Browns are an 11-year old franchise with virtually nothing to show for it. A team that couldn't really decide on a quarterback in 1999 is still a team that can't decide on a quarterback today. Its chances of making the playoffs this year are only incrementally better than they were back then. It's a franchise on its fourth makeover already and still hasn't realized that its most fundamental problem is that it lacks any sort of foundation.

Eric Mangini takes over and becomes just the latest Mr. Fix-It. He sports a personal resume that shows dramatic upward mobility but no great successes. It's the perfect complement, really, to that of the owner that hired him and the perfect metaphor for what passes for progress in this town.

It's hard to even remember, now, whether anyone really thought that Chris Palmer, for example, was a good hire or just the one most available. Palmer was a successful quarterbacks coach but why anyone thought he could take the next step is as ridiculous of a notion now as the thought that another lifelong assistant, in the form of Romeo Crennel, could do likewise.

Butch Davis had the chance to be a transformative figure, but he was completely mismanaged by Al Lerner. Davis is and always will be a head coach. He has a better sense of its rhythms. And I still think Davis could have been a good coach here, but he needed a support system from Lerner. Instead he got a cheerleader. Davis hadn't earned the power he was given and it isn't really a surprise that he eventually squandered it. A better judge of talent might have still picked Davis but would have paired him with a capable general manager. Davis was in over his head from day one and neither he nor Lerner seemed to notice until it was too late.

Crennel, on the other hand, had virtually no chance of being successful. Not every lieutenant can make the jump to general and not every assistant coach can be a head coach. How neither Lerner nor Phil Savage saw that is more mystifying than the fact that Savage drafted Beau Bell.

If Mangini can really fix this franchise and actually point it in the right direction, then most of what's taken place before it will be forgotten if not forgiven. But Mangini's got a tall order not just because of the institutional problems that came with the job but also because he's carrying more than enough baggage of his own.

Circling back to the little quarterback debate (because, after all, that's what we must do), Mangini's little cat-and-mouse game with the fans, the media and the rest of the league is silly mostly for the reason that it is just the kind of self-inflicted pressure this team doesn't need.

In many ways, Mangini's decision to supposedly keep his choice a secret until kickoff is similar to the kind of pressure that's created whenever a player or a coach guarantees a victory. Rather than the actual match-up with the opponent, the "guarantee" or, as here, the "choice," has become this game's focal point. And to what end? Why does Mangini want his players constantly answering questions about who is starting at quarterback? Exactly how does that make his team better prepared?

The other thing that makes this whole "who will start?" debate so ridiculous is that Mangini acts as if it matters. The differences between Brady Quinn and Derek Anderson are hardly on the same level as the differences between, say, Vince Young and Kerry Collins. Maybe if a team knows that Anderson isn't starting they won't have to worry about covering mid-range passes since he can't complete them anyway, but that's about it. The Browns aren't going to change their offense dramatically for either player and any team, especially with one that has the legitimate aspirations of the Vikings, know that.

If it works out it, and there's no way to really ever know if it will, then Mangini will probably do the same thing every week. If it doesn't, and there's no way to really ever know if it didn't, then it just becomes another thing over which to poke fun.

In the larger sense, though, what worries is not the transient concern over who is behind center on Sunday. It's the fact that the current caretaker is so obsessed with it as fostering some sort of self-concocted advantage . It's one thing to be detail-oriented. It's another thing to be obsessive-compulsive. Right now it's hard to see exactly where Mangini is trending on that scale but I know where I think it's going.

And that, actually, is why there's still a pit in my stomach about this franchise. It never does anything exactly right. It never makes exactly the right hire or drafts exactly the right player. Every decision has a "yea, but" attached to it. The only way this franchise is ever going to progress is by reducing the "yea buts" to an acceptable minimum. Unfortunately, Mangini has just added to them at the moment.