The NFL season is finally upon us. But it was a bittersweet start for Browns fans, as NBC fawned all over the Pittsburgh Steelers for four hours straight, ending in a 13-10 overtime win for the Browns hated rivals. In Gary's latest edition of Lingering Items, he talks about the Browns role in the Steelers's recent success. He lays out his predictions and expectations for the 2009 Browns. And hits on what are expected to be attendance woes and potential blackouts for the team this season.

With the NFL season getting under way, it's understandable that the national media would be genuflecting at the altar of the Pittsburgh Steelers as the model franchise. It's an easy column to write even if it ignores the role that the Cleveland Browns, a former rival turned speed bump, has played in contributing to their success.

In the simplistic way that these things usually get analyzed, most writers have quickly concluded that the secret recipe is the Steelers' legendary continuity on the field and in the front office and basically say "see, if every team had that they'd be as good as the Steelers." Analysis complete. Next story, "what does Brett Favre think about playing for a former division rival?"

Queue the pop psychology.

Yea, well, I suppose, except it is, well, rather a simplistic view. Continuity for its own sake is hardly the most laudable of goals, although former Browns general manager Phil Savage might disagree.

In the name of continuity he kept marching former head coach Romeo Crennel out there year after year believing that the healing powers of time passing would suddenly transform Crennel into a capable head coach.

It didn't and, in the name of sanity, Savage was sent along his merry way.

This isn't to single out Savage. Any team can simply hang on to whoever's in charge at the moment and declare themselves successful, actual results notwithstanding. Continuity isn't a goal, it's an outgrowth. In the case of the Steelers, it's a convenient label that serves merely as a description for what truly is the key to their success: good hires.

It took decades to develop but the Rooneys now have a real eye for talent.

As a team, the Steelers roster turnover each season tends to be in the same ballpark as most other teams. That's the outgrowth of a hard salary cap and a fairly vibrant free agent market. The key, when it comes to personnel, isn't just having the right players, it's having them at the right prices. Veterans tend to cost a team more money just because they're veterans and teams are thus willing to cut the chord if a comparable replacement can be found at half the price. The Steelers aren't any different in that regard than the Browns.

Savage was fond of stressing the importance of continuity from one year to the next even as he was turning over about half the roster each year. In other words, teams that seemingly preach continuity only practice it selectively because, well, it's not about continuity at all.

It's about the right people in the right place at the right time.

Football, in that respect, is no different than any other sport or any other business.

At its heart it's a people business.

The Steelers' vaunted continuity isn't by design or by accident.

It's just merely the result of the fact that they've made great hires over the last 30 or so years.

Chuck Noll was a great head coach, a legend.

He had to grow in the job like anyone else, but no organization, including the Steelers, would have allowed him that luxury if had not been able to demonstrate the key qualities for being a successful head coach from the start.

When Bill Cowher took over for Noll, he faced the burden of taking over for a legend but had the luxury of doing it under a far more highly tuned organization than the one Noll had when he first became coach. Whether Mike Tomlin lasts as long as either Cowher or Noll isn't set in stone but he, too, benefits from a highly-skilled organization that's been in place and knows what works. His chances for success were already far greater than other first-time head coaches.

That doesn't mean his success was a lay-up.

The fact that he hasn't blown the opportunities he's been given thus far demonstrates that he, too, is probably a great hire.

Contrast that for a moment with the Browns. For all practical purposes, the franchise folded in 1995. Whatever momentum that had built up over the previous 50 years was lost.

The franchise was re-born five years later with only a name, colors and a record book to show for what had taken place in the past.

As refreshing as a cleansing can be, the return of the Browns was so much more than that.

It was, basically, an expansion franchise with a distant history.

In that context, the supposed lack of continuity with the Browns is understandable.

Let's go back, again, to the Steelers for a moment.

The Rooney family has owned the team since its formation in 1933.

In the first 20 years of that franchise, it had 10 different head coaches.

In the 10 years before it landed on Noll as its head coach, they had 3 different head coaches and only 3 seasons in which it was even over the .500 mark.

Noll struggled his first three seasons as well.

That means that for at least the first 36 years, they weren't so good at building continuity.

Eventually they landed on the right hires. But those right hires may not have ever revealed themselves but for the other key factor, good drafting.

Noll's ascent as a head coach coincided with the arrival of the likes of Terry Bradshaw, Franco Harris, Lynn Swann, Jack Lambert, need I go on?

This sort of harmonic convergence is as responsible as anything for what now is being called continuity.

As a franchise, the Browns are mere babies. It would be nice to think that it won't take them 36 years before they start to get things right and it probably won't.

But the fact that there have been more fits than starts is more than understandable in an historical context.

Maybe Eric Mangini turns into the next Chuck Noll and the national media 10 years from now extol's Cleveland's great continuity, but the likelihood of that happening depends somewhat on whether Mangini and general manager George Kokinis can find their own versions of Bradshaw, Harris, Swan and Lambert. That 's the real recipe and, for what it's worth, it appears at least that they know it.

It's that simple even as it's that hard.

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For the first time since the Browns returned, local fans face the very real possibility that one or more games will be blacked out this season. This isn't a problem peculiar to the Browns but is something being faced by the overwhelming majority of teams.

NFL games are expensive and right now it is a luxury that many in the hard core fan base either can't afford or choose not to.

The Browns have various promotions going trying to increase attendance. Recall, for example, that they partnered with the Indians on loge sales for individual games.

They also have a package for the average fan, 3 tickets and refreshments for $96.

They aren't alone.

This is why it remains so puzzling that owner Randy Lerner would allow his hand-picked head coach to do almost everything in his power to keep the fan base and their proxy, the media, at bay. If any group of fans has been misused and abused, it's Browns fans. That isn't all Lerner's fault, of course.

Art Modell and the NFL had a significant hand in it.

Still, Lerner hasn't exactly turned things around and now, with still another makeover and three to four year gestation period ahead of them, it's time to give the fans a break.

Bring them closer, don't push them away.

Mangini and company instead treat them like necessary evils. The whole quarterback debate stands as Exhibit A.

Whether or not it should be important to fans who is starting for their team, it is important.

It gives them something to either rally around or debate.

Mangini could care less.

He's got his own agenda and the fans aren't part of it.

The only way this kind of strategy can't backfire for Mangini is if he becomes wildly successful. New England fans embrace Belichick even as he continues to act like a prick toward them. But New England at least had some success before Belichick arrived. The Browns haven't had any real success in about two decades.

Context is everything.

Mangini seems to be bringing some necessary order and discipline to a franchise that didn't have much of either before he arrived. That's a very good thing. But anything worth building will take time and Mangini should be buying all the goodwill he can to bridge the abyss that has been 10 years in the making, 20 if you want to go back that far.

Instead he seems singularly bent on making his life as difficult as possible and at the worst possible time for the franchise.

When things got rough for Belichick in Cleveland, it didn't help his cause that he was wildly unpopular with the fans. He had no one to lean on and ultimately fell on his face.

The Browns are going to struggle at various points in the season. All teams do. As the head coach, Mangini will naturally face the brunt of the backlash, the depths of which highly depend on how the fans feel about him personally.

Whether he wants to acknowledge it or not, Mangini and his team need the hearts and minds of the fans.

He won't survive without them.

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I've never been much into predictions. But it's an obligatory by-product of covering a team in a sport and thus I venture reluctantly into trying to figure out how the Browns will do this season.

The short answer is the most truthful: I don't know. If I did, I'd place huge sums of money on it and then retire early to enjoy golf on a daily basis.

The more complicated answer is: it depends.

In the NFL particularly, schedules and injuries have more to do with a team's final record than anything else.

It's not necessarily the teams you play but when you play them and where.

And all that gets thrown out the window if there are too many injuries.

In the Browns' case, however, there is a more overarching issue. This team is a mystery and it's on purpose.

Mangini has deliberately kept people guessing about a variety of issues beyond just the starting quarterback.

Key players have been missing during the pre-season with virtually no explanation.

The injury list that Mangini released, apparently at gun point, says very little.

Thus, when it comes to the Browns there is little of the usual facts upon which to base your best guess.

So let's start with the basic premise on which the NFL operates: every team should go 8-8. From there it's just a matter of adjustment. If you think a team is a little above average, 9-7 is a very safe pick.

Likewise if you think a team is a little below average, 7-9 is a great guess.

The elite teams tend to win at least 10 games.

The dregs usually end up in the 4-5 range, mainly because at some point their seasons spin out of control and they give up hope and head for home in time for Christmas.

The Browns are not an elite team by any measure. They're probably not even average, which means you have to start with a prediction of 7-9.

Now it's time to think about personnel and schedules.

I don't think the Browns were really as bad as their record last year. I think they were a 7-9 team coached down to a 4-12 record.

Just paying attention and being more organized is good for a victory or two.

I also think that Mangini has a better command of the entire operations and is far more detail-oriented.

The team will be better prepared each week.

I think the schedule is more favorable than in year's past.

It's certainly less disruptive.

Outside of a Thursday and Monday night game, both within the division, the Browns play mostly play at 1 p.m. each Sunday.

There's something to be said for, dare I say it, continuity, at least in that sense.

When I put all that together, roll it around inside a mostly hollow head, I start to think that Mangini can get this team back to where it's talent level properly is: 7-9.

Fans will see it as improvement.

I see it as just getting back to square one.

But if it gives the team hope and is a stepping stone to a better future, then it all will have been worth it.

If it doesn't, it's time to start handicapping who the next head coach might be.

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Given how much the media revere the Rooney family at the moment, this week's question to ponder: Had they been in charge of the Browns last season, would they have hired Eric Mangini as their head coach?