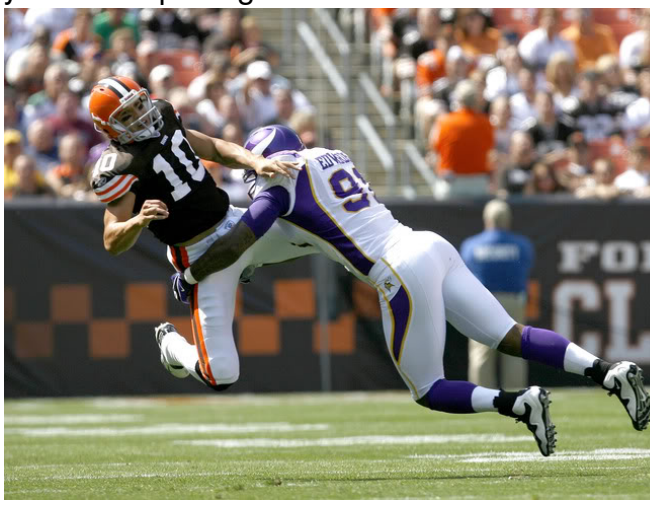
The Browns made no landmark player acquisitions this spring. Eric Mangini signed a number of retreads from his former team, the Jets, and traded down three times in the first round, ultimately drafting center Alex Mack. This is, with a few minor alterations, the team Phil Savage and Romeo Crennel left on the doorstep on their way out of town. So why, despite years and years of a losing precedent set beforehand, are we disappointed when the Browns come out and falter against quality competition, as they did in Sunday's 34-20 opening week loss to the Vikings? Papa Cass gives us his thoughts on the matter.



What drives fan optimism at the outset of every season? What makes the fans of a perennially awful team like the Browns believe that this is finally the season where, if championship contention isn't achieved outright, then at least the team will start to show some definite signs of moving in that direction?

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So why do we want so badly to believe that this is the year that the Browns start looking like an NFL football team? Why, despite years and years of a losing precedent set beforehand, are we disappointed when the Browns come out and falter against quality competition, as they did in Sunday's 34-20 opening week loss to the Vikings?

The answer isn't complicated. We don't want to believe that the Browns are actually this bad. We want to believe that the talent is there to field at least a competitive football team. It's just a matter of harnessing the right coaching and leadership to turn this rag-tag band of misfits into a ship-shape battalion, ready for action.

If you want to believe that, the good news is you're right -- to a point. The Browns can be the team that toted a 13-10 lead into the locker room at halftime, held Adrian Peterson in check for the entire first half, and looked like a tougher-than-expected test for Minnesota, a team with Super Bowl aspirations.

The bad news is, they can also be the team that wilted in mind-numbing fashion in the second half, ultimately letting Peterson run over them for 180 yards and three touchdowns, including an embarrassing 64-yard, fourth quarter touchdown scamper in which essentially the entire Browns defense had a chance to tackle him, but failed to do so.

The really bad news is the same really bad news that has been hanging around for most of the past 10 years: when the Browns encounter adversity, they believe they are the second-half team. And that is the biggest challenge that will face Man gini
and his staff. Because until the Browns conquer their own mind games, they're always going to be a league doormat.

What we saw in the second half was a telltale sign of a team mired in a losing culture. At halftime, the Vikings apparently figured they weren't hitting the Browns hard enough with their running game. Minnesota came out of the tunnel determined to use Peterson to pummel Cleveland's defense with body blows. When the Vikings started to succeed with their running attack, the Browns' delicate confidence started to crack.

A small lead became a small deficit became a larger deficit, and whether the Browns' players will admit to it or even realized it, they had packed up their mental suitcase and began counting down the minutes until they could go home.

Everything about the Browns performance in the fourth quarter seemed to say "Here we go again. Can this game be over with already?"

The mistakes, the penalties, the miscommunication on both sides of the ball, Peterson's final-nail touchdown scamper, all of it was the result of a team that was resigned to losing. A team that slowly and skeptically believes in its successes, but whip-crack quick to believe in its shortcomings.

This is what Mangini needs to eradicate. This is the fungal infection left over from Carmen Policy and Dwight Clark in the post-expansion years, an infection that

Butch Davis, Phil Savage and Romeo Crennel failed to cure.

Certainly, the root cause of the Browns' struggles isn't all mental. Botched draft picks and free agent signings have created a very real talent deficit. Bad coaching over the years has added more tangles to the knot.

But if you're wondering why teams like the Steelers and Patriots can seem to turn small-college players and pro castoffs into champions, while the Browns botch high draft pick after high draft pick, you have to consider the type of environment that each team provides.

Is it that the Browns consistently overdraft players that lack the talent and skills to succeed in the NFL, while the Steelers and the league's other elite teams continually find diamonds in the rough? At times, yes. But the league's best teams tend to bring out the best in each player. Teams like the Browns tend to bury what talent they do have by bringing players into an environment where losing is so entrenched, the veterans are pretty much numb to it.

If they're not numb, games like Sunday's, repeated week after week, will shortly make them numb. And if the veterans build up thick callouses to losing, what chance do the younger players -- the players who are supposedly going to be around when the Browns finally starting winning again -- have of being any different?

After the game, Mangini had at least one blatantly-obvious, yet spot-on comment. In so many words, he said his team has a decision to make: They can either be the first-half team, or the second-half team.

The first-half team might have to get by on pluck and guile against teams like the Vikings. They might not ultimately win, but they're going to grow a backbone, play smart, minimize penalties, take care of the football and do whatever they can to try and score the W.

The second-half team believes they're bad. The second half team mails in the loss when faced with adversity. Over the span of weeks, the second-half team stops caring, starts playing for individual goals and contracts, and eventually just wants the season to end.

This is where Mangini has to succeed where his predecessors have failed. He

needs to get that first-half team to show up and play for 60 minutes every week. It's going to be a tough task, especially during games in which the Browns' best effort might not be enough to secure a win. But it's a mindset shift that needs to occur, or Mangini's best-laid plans will never bear fruit.

The first-half Browns are as undertalented and miles away from contention as the second-half Browns. But it's that team, and their constructive play, that provides the basis for any future hope for a turnaround. The team that showed up in the second half is Mangini's pink slip in waiting, and our express ticket to Regime No. 5 since 1999.

The coming weeks will offer us our first real picture of this team's direction, and on Mangini's ability to be a culture-changer. From the standpoint of Browns fans, it's a far more important task than anything involving X's and O's.