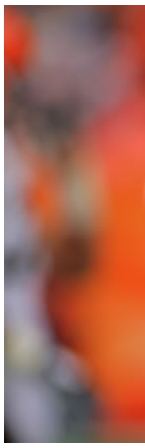
Rarely is it a good time to be a Cleveland sports fan but some times are better than others. This is one of the others. Browns fans seemed particularly despondent over the team's dismal performance at Denver on Sunday. It wasn't so much that they expected the team to win. They just didn't expect them to lose that bad. As the game played out in its mind-numbing slowness, it's glacial pace gave fans plenty of time to contemplate just how long it might be until this team, this franchise, is competitive again. From the looks of things at the moment, it will be years.



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That the Browns season is effectively over two games in is just another helping of bad news on a town that thought that this past NBA season would bring the championship this town believes it deserves. An inability to match-up with an otherwise inferior opponent carried an aura of inevitability of the defeat that surely came.

Then, of course, the meltdown by the Cleveland Indians followed, carrying with it all earmarks of a business model that's built around developing players that can later be traded. The Indians are a franchise without the financial wherewithal to develop and retain core players and fans just know at this point that any World

Series title depends mostly on the harmonic convergence of young players exceeding expectations before they can be free agents.

With the Indians season now a distant memory despite a handful of games remaining and the Cavs still a several days away from camp (and sorting out what the heck Delonte West was thinking), focus is on the Browns. It's not quite a team in disarray in the Romeo Crennel sense, but it's a team with limited purpose.

Trying to get a bead on head coach Eric Mangini is proving more elusive as each day passes. Quarterback Brady Quinn, a rookie quarterback in every way but name, is saddled with a somewhat suspect offensive line, a non-existent running back led by a back several years past his prime, and a receiving corps with a college quarterback and kick returner extraordinaire acting as its second best option.

Then there's the defense. It features a secondary that can't cover a slot receiver or tackle a running back. The last time the linebackers put pressure on an opposing quarterback on a regular basis, Clay Matthews, Sr. was only known as Clay Matthews.

And the defensive line?

In two games opposing teams have averaged more than 200 yards on the ground and the nose tackle is a Pro Bowler.

Where does that leave the team now and, more importantly, where is the direction that Mangini wants to take it? At the moment there's no way of telling because the next time that Mangini provides a substantive answer on anything will be the first time. He's no more going to offer a credible explanation on why he's trying to mold Josh Cribbs into a big-time receiver at the expense of two potential big-time receivers that he just drafted in the second round then he is on why, despite the fact that Jamal Lewis is done as a running back, he left the team so thin in that department.

Fans are always about instant gratification but the sense of dread is not over immediate results. No one is calling for Mangini to be fired and most fans know, intellectually if not emotionally, that it's going to take far more than one off -season and a few games to fix this mess. But on the other hand they'd at least like to think that entering their 11th season, this version of the Browns has more of a chance to win a few games than the expansion version did.

It is on this notion that Mangini will be judged.

Assessing Mangini in this context thus far is difficult. The team has a serious deficit in talent and while Mangini made all the calls on which personnel would be retained and which would be jettisoned, it's not like he could fire everyone and start over, either.

What he has done so far, though, begs a few questions that he'll never answer.

Among the most puzzling is why Brian Robiskie was inactive for the Denver game and why Mohamad Massaquoi basically didn't play until garbage time. Is it really the case that Cribbs is well ahead of both of them or more the case of trying to figure out right now the full limits of Cribbs' potential?

It's no knock on Cribbs to say that his usefulness as a receiver is limited. He can run reverses just fine but lacks the polish and skill to run crisp routes and get open consistently at the moment. That may change down the road by why is it being done at the expense of two receivers with far bigger upsides?

One theory is that the more Cribbs is out there with the first team offense, the more effective the so-called wildcat offense will become. That probably holds some merit but until Cribbs starts throwing from that formation, NFL defenses will know what's coming and respond accordingly.

The Vikings only needed to see it once to stop it the second time.

Mangini hinted at an answer with respect to Robiskie, offering the rather odd excuse that Robiskie was inactive because Mangini needed to get newly-acquired Patriots castoff defensive back Ray Ventrone in the mix on special teams. Hard to tell if that was a slam at Robiskie or a slam at the special teams, but either way the Browns have essentially relegated one of their second round picks behind an unsigned free agent begging for a gig until Mangini through him a lifeline.

Another puzzle is the defense. Sure, it lacks credible defensive ends, linebackers, cornerbacks and safeties, but why are they so out of shape? Or is it my imagination that they can't sustain either their stamina or their interest for a full 60 minutes?

You can argue somewhat correctly that if the offense would sustain a few more drives maybe the defense wouldn't get so tired. But what of the notion that this is only the second game of the season and the players should be less banged up and in enough shape to sustain their energy irrespective of how long they've been on the field in a particular game? They do this for a living, the least they can do is be in shape.

The challenge for Mangini, just two games in though it feels like 22, is not only stifling the losing culture but keeping it from further metastasizing. Show me a team that is losing like this and I'll show you a team that is falling apart at the seams. Want proof? Look at the spectacularly dismal way Eric Wedge is bringing his limp horse of a team back to the barn.

It is exactly the same feeling that fans had at the end of the Browns season last year, more bored than pissed looking on at injured and indifferent players acting as if a rectal exam would be more welcome.

It may be far too soon to say the players on this team are just mailing in their performance each week, but it isn't too soon to conclude that they go into each week expecting to lose. It's the inevitable result when the elements of an indifferent owner, bad hires, bad drafts and bad karma meet. Maybe Mangini can become the change agent to actually alter the recipe of this toxic soup, but given the way his team and his draft picks have played thus far, the list of things that need to get fixed isn't any shorter.