Gary checks into his usual Saturday spot with this week's Lingering Items. This weekend Gary tackles the Eric Wedge firing, the media buzzards that are circling around Eric Mangini, the alleged e-mail that Randy Lerner sent to the President of the Baltimore Browns Backers, the player grievances filed against Mangini, and some very candid comments made this week by Braylon Edwards and Shaun Rogers.

Sometimes helps comes from the most unexpected places. Take this past Wednesday. Seemingly out of nowhere, in the middle of one of the worst weeks for Browns and their fans since Bill Belichick cut Bernie Kosar, Cleveland Indians general manager Mark Shapiro temporarily takes the focus of his beleaguered brother-in-law, Eric Mangini, by canning Eric Wedge and his entire coaching staff. It worked, for a moment anyway.

The Wedge firing doesn't necessarily carry the same unbridled enthusiasm that the dismissal of Mangini might carry at the moment. Wedge's shortcomings as a manager are well chronicled but at least he was approachable. He never carried himself to be the smartest guy in the room. He protected his players, sometimes to a fault, and was respectful, sometimes to a fault, of their struggles. Wedge will stay in baseball and has a real shot at managing again someday.

His firing was a bit of a surprise, at least in terms of timing. It turns out that Wedge asked Shapiro several days ago to know his fate before the team went to Boston for the final series. Shapiro accommodated Wedge, a nice move, and gave him the ubiquitous "going in a different direction" speech.

That Wedge stayed on to finish the season knowing he was done is an interesting

but ultimately characteristically Wedge move. See it through to the end, no matter the outcome. Many of Wedge's failures this season and for the last 7 seasons were every bit Shapiro's failures and vice versa. But it really is time to actually go in that different direction. Here's hoping that the Dolans and Shapiro are better at due diligence when it comes to hiring a manager than Randy Lerner was when it came to hiring a new head coach.

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Back to the brother-in-law. It's been a tough week for anything associated with the Cleveland Browns. The media buzzards are circling around Mangini as if he's already dead creating a sense among everyone else that perhaps Mangini's firing is imminent. That is highly doubtful. He'll make it through the season and probably well beyond.

For Lerner to actually pull the plug so quickly would require a whole lot of psychology to overcome. Making a move that quickly requires an impulsive personality, which is the exact opposite of Lerner's disconnected approach. Lerner also has a lot personally invested in the decision. He made it solo which means he's got his own reputation on the line and he's going to need far more evidence than a little erratic decision making this early in the season to convince him that he was wrong.

Larry Elavasky, the self-appointed president of the Baltimore Browns Backers club, claims he wrote a letter to Lerner expressing his abject disappointment in the Browns and how it was making him sick to even watch the team. Elavasky claims that Lerner wrote him an email back and, among other things, expressed his faith in Mangini. (See letter and response here) In particular, Lerner said that when he got to the Browns "there was essentially no front office or core culture to define scouting, player evaluation or the draft let alone what is [sic] was to care about Cleveland and football....It is common knowledge of course that it took Tom Landry roughly seven seasons to build a winner in the 60s in Dallas. With the Steelers, it was probably 30 odd years from the time the team was acquired to

when it stumbled on Chuck Knoll-and it has never turned back."

The alleged email then went on to say that Lerner is heartbroken about the results so far as are his kids and concluded with "I do know that Eric Mangini knows his football and is a straight-shooter and a deeply decent man. To say the least, I believe he can get this thing right. Fingers crossed."

I have no idea if the email is legitimate. Lerner doesn't talk to anyone and it's hard to believe in some sense that he would use email, the very vehicle that got Phil Savage in trouble with Lerner, as a coming out party of sorts. It's also hard to believe that in an email he would throw his own Dad under the bus by saying what a mess the franchise was when he inherited it. Just call me skeptical.

On the other hand, the sentiment he expresses about Mangini is exactly where you'd think it would be. Lerner wouldn't have hired Mangini if he didn't think he knew football or if he didn't think that Mangini was a decent sort. If it's not a legitimate letter, kudos on the writer for getting this detail exactly right.

Irrespective of whether or not it's real, it's accurate. Getting this thing right isn't a job that is either easily or quickly done. It did take that long in Dallas and Pittsburgh. Moreover, Lerner must feel Mangini is the right person to accomplish that task or it makes no sense to hire him in the first place. Speculate all you want but the most likely case it that we'll all be here a year from now with the same complaints and the same speculation about Mangini's future with the team.

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There's been plenty of talk in the last week about a number of players filing grievances against Mangini because of the imposition of fines. Mangini actually addressed the issue at his weekly press conference saying that grievances like these are common and that he'd be surprised if players didn't file grievances,

surmising that upwards of 90% of fines get grieved.

If only the Browns could play that good of defense.

As the head coach, Mangini is well within his rights under the collective bargaining agreement to set forth a list of infractions for which a player could be fined. Indeed, the agreement has a section dedicated to detailing the types of fines that may be levied and the upper limit on the amount of the fine. It even contains a yearly adjustment to that upper limit, a cost of living increase of sorts for fines. Players showing up late for meetings, reporting overweight and the like are very common fines in the NFL. Mangini's schedule probably goes beyond what many other teams have in place but it's hard to argue with his intent. Players should pay for their incidentals at hotels and they shouldn't park in handicap spots, unless they play defense, I suppose.

In any evnet, when a player is fined his option is to pay it or grieve it. The grievance procedure in the collective bargaining agreement is two steps. First, the player files his complaint with club management. If he's unsatisfied with the answer, which he undoubtedly will be, he can file it with the league office and have a neutral arbitrator hear the matter.

Not to get into a debate with Mangini and thus subject myself to a fine, but Mangini just isn't correct when he says that grievances are filed over most of these matters. To the contrary, most fines don't result in grievances. They get paid and the player moves on.

When they do get filed, it's for one of two reasons. Either the player doesn't think he committed the infraction or the player believes that the fine imposed was unfair relative to either the seriousness of the infraction or the fines levied to others similarly situated. Sometimes it's a combination of the two, as in "I didn't do it but if I did the fine is too much because Braylon only had to pay $250 for coming in late after the Michigan game."

In either case, this narrows down the number of grievances that do get filed. Generally players know whether or not they committed the infraction and the amount imposed is usually according to a schedule so its relative fairness isn't often an issue. Thus if upwards of 90% of the fines Mangini levies are indeed resulting in grievances, either here or when he was in New York, that's a damning indictment on him. Again, though, it's not really true. It's just another Manginism.

As I said last week, the merits of the grievances files against Mangini aren't the issue. Indeed, I assume that Mangini isn't so random as to fine individuals without some basis. But the fact that a number of players already perceive unfairness and are willing to confront their head coach in an arbitration setting over it speaks volumes. Sure, Mangini or any head coach is prohibited from retaliating against a player because he filed a grievance but in a league where a player can get cut, without recourse, for performance reasons, determining retaliation is nearly impossible, particularly for fringe players. Consequences be damned, I ain't paying no 50 cents for no coke.

This is exactly the kind of thing that undid Mangini in New York. Players perceived him as unfair for a variety of reasons. Whether he was or not was no longer the issue. Eventually ownership became convinced that Mangini lost the locker room and decided it was easier to fire one than to fire 53.

Mangini hasn't lost the Browns' locker room at this point. But manipulations with the quarterbacks and the iron fist when it comes to fines aren't winning him many converts at the moment. For those already predisposed to feel that he's unfair, based on reality or their own perception of reality, these things just tip the balance and become their leading exhibits for making their case to other players and to management.

This Browns team isn't going to be competitive until Mangini can take away that kind of politicking in the locker room and get the players on the same page and focused on the next opponent only. That he hasn't made much of a dent in that so far is a problem. That's really job one. It may take a huge housecleaning to

accomplish but he can't get rid of everyone. When it comes down to it the biggest threat to Mangini's tenure is if/when Lerner becomes convinced that it indeed is much easier to fire one than to fire 53.

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At least reality hasn't quite left town.

If you're looking for some proof that not everything associated with the Browns at the moment is off its rails, consider this. At least some players understand that they are as much of a problem as anything else.

There was Braylon Edwards candidly admitting that the team has underachieved and that it may not even matter much who's at quarterback. According to the Plain Dealer he said, "to be honest, we can't do any worse. It sounds, I don't know, maybe it's bad to say, but I don't think we can play any worse than we did." It's as honest as an assessment as you're likely to read by someone on the inside.

One of the more telling quotes though came from Shaun Rogers. As reported in the Plain Dealer, Rogers labeled Sunday's game with Cincinnati as "oh so, oh so important" and added this gem in discussing his team's chances: "I would love to win, but I just want to see us compete this week, really." From your lips to God's ears, Shaun.

I like it when players demonstrate this level of unvarnished awareness publicly. Too often a player is so rote in saying "we just have to get better" that you wonder whether he has any sense that maybe he just isn't good enough to get any better.. Edwards first and now Rogers at least understand that this team needs to be competitive before it can even think about winning. Recognition really is the first step on the road back from rock bottom. If this isn't rock bottom,

then that's another column for another week.

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Here's hoping that Derek Anderson succeeds where Brady Quinn could not. But if he can't then everyone associated with the Browns will be asking this week's question to ponder: "What now?"