This Browns season is a death march to an inevitable conclusion that ends with a very high draft pick, no present and only a future to look forward to. Maybe. But we've been down this road a few times before, so it's kind of easy to assume. But Thursday's report that Josh Cribbs wants a contract extension, and would possibly welcome a trade if the Browns don't give him what he wants, was another inventive way for something Browns-related to raise Erik Cassano's blood pressure. He talks about it in his latest column.

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If you think the Browns's uninspiring win over Buffalo last weekend is a possible turning point, great for you. I'll take a win over a loss any day of the week, too. But as far progress? It wasn't exactly the Industrial Revolution.

A 6-3 win isn't going to get me through this Browns season. It really isn't going to offer any shelter in the storm. The only thing that makes me hopeful involves a sense of grim resignation about the team's current state.

New coaching regime. Bad team. Botched draft picks from the previous regime. Players who want out. The equation kind of solves itself.

The Browns aren't rebuilding. They haven't reached that point yet. Right now, Eric Mangini is in teardown mode. And that's the prism through which I'm viewing this season -- if only as a means of keeping my sanity.

The Browns are going to be a worse team at the end of the season than they were at the start of the season. They might be a worse team than they are right now, with the NFL's trade deadline approaching next Tuesday.

Teams in teardown mode get rid of players who don't fit the new coach's philosophies. Teams in teardown mode part ways with locker-room cancers and other dissenters within the ranks. That's especially true of Mangini, who is making it crystal clear that it's his video game, and he has his hand on the joystick at all times.

So out the door went talented players with a tendency to provide their own sideshows, either with their mouths or actions. Kellen Winslow, playing on borrowed time with a reconstructed knee, was shown the door rather quickly by M angini
. It took an alleged fight outside a nightclub to get
Braylon
Edwards on the next train out of town, but in the aftermath of the incident,
Mangini
got on his tin-can-and-string to the Jets' front office and had Edwards traded in less than 48 hours.

Brady Quinn had 10 quarters to show his skills as the starting quarterback. When the Baltimore game got out of hand in Week 3, Quinn was ushered to the bench, and might not see action in a Browns uniform again. He is attempting to sell his house in Avon Lake, per reports this week. Quinn's stated excuse is that he doesn't want to commute 30 minutes one way from Avon Lake to Berea. He told reporters that he's "downsizing."

The slumping economy has hit just about everyone with varying degrees of force, but Quinn shouldn't be surprised if fans and media find it a little suspicious that a guy making NFL first-round draft pick money is selling his house simply to decrease his commute time and save some green. Quinn also shouldn't be surprised if he's wearing another team's uniform (possibly green) by the weekend after next. Something tells me he really won't be.

So far, each move, each threatened move, I've approached with a deep breath and a sigh. Losing Winslow and Edwards means that they didn't work out here. It means that decreasing the talent level on the roster is better than moving forward

with guys who are game-changers with flapping gums and maturity issues. OK, I can see the logic. When the plant you're trying to grow hasn't sprouted yet, it's best to remove all potential poisons from the soil. Winslow and Edwards possessed definite poison potential.

If Mangini trades Quinn, I won't be happy because I will still stand by my belief that Quinn didn't get a fair shake. He's been jerked around worse than Tim Couch in some ways. But two starting quarterbacks is one too many. More poison potential, so it's better to proceed with one QB for the immediate future. If Mangini believes that guy is Derek Anderson, fine. It's a decision. And this season really isn't about wins and losses anyway.

But the Browns have a way of taking your shoulder shrugs and turning them into wailing and gnashing of teeth. This is a team that has a knack for hitting its followers right where it hurts. Sometimes, it's not even the fault of the team. At least, not directly.

Thursday's report that Josh Cribbs wants a contract extension, and would possibly welcome a trade if the Browns don't give him what he wants, was another inventive way for something Browns-related to raise my blood pressure.

According to The Plain Dealer, the Browns probably won't trade Cribbs prior to Tuesday's deadline, unless Mangini is absolutely bowled over by an offer. Chances are, it's little more than posturing. In the NFL, where the players have very little bargaining power compared to their counterparts in Major League Baseball and the NBA, holdouts, threats of holdouts and trade demands are an often-used bargaining chip in contract negotiations.

But suppose negotiations get really contentious. Suppose Mangini won't budge. Suppose Mangini, who apparently isn't below playing God with his team, decides to call Cribbs' bluff and smite him with a trade, either before next week's deadline or during the coming offseason.

Call it the Butch Davis Rule. Davis believed that players were little more than mov able
pieces, and it didn't matter how talented or electrifying a player was, he was replaceable by someone younger, cheaper and more grateful just to have a spot on an NFL roster.

If Davis could have farmed special teams work out to a call center in India, he would have. I'd be lying if I said I didn't see a Davis streak in Mangini.

The problem with that line of thinking is, Josh Cribbs is really the only player the Browns have who is talented enough to be a star. Yes, Shaun Rogers is pretty darn good, as is Joe Thomas, but "star nose tackle" and "star offensive tackle" are both something of an oxymoron. They're supporting cast positions by nature.

Cribbs is the only player dangerous enough to force other teams to adjust their attack. He's the only player exciting enough to make fans stop raking the leaves on an Autumn Sunday and watch an opponent's punt. Sure, Cribbs' star has pretty much been limited to special teams, but he is one of the rare players who can actually change the complexion of a game by touching the ball only a handful of times.

If the relationship between Cribbs and Mangini becomes pocked and scarred by the battle over contract money, and
Mangini
feels like he can replace
Cribbs
with any
Syndric
Steptoe
who comes down the pipe, I'm going to have a hard time believing any
rationalization
Mangini
might have for trading
Cribbs
.

Draft picks were enough for Winslow and Edwards because they weren't part of M angini's

long-term plans, and they both wore out their welcome anyway. Draft picks would be enough for Quinn. In all three cases, the trades are and would be about subtraction as much as addition.

But Cribbs is different. Cribbs has been one of the few players, perhaps the only player, we could count on to consistently pique our interest in this dreary era of Browns football. He's a solid citizen, and by all indications, loves playing for the Browns, in spite of the losing. Unlike Winslow and Edwards, he's worth paying. He's worth building around, even if his specialty is, and probably always will be, returning kicks.

Despite the throwaway mentality that Mangini -- and most other NFL coaches -- have toward players, guys like Cribbs don't come in 24-packs at Costco.

I can rationalize Mangini's teardown mode mentality almost all the way. But if it comes to trading Cribbs, I just can't do it. In the backwards way of the Browns, he's a franchise kick returner. He's just about the only thing we have right now.

Mangini had better recognize that fact, and recognize the damage he'd do to the franchise's reputation -- and possibly ticket sales -- by trading Cribbs. Then, he'd better open up Randy Lerner's wallet and give one of the few Browns players who is worth a damn the raise he's seeking.

If Cribbs isn't worth paying, who on this roster is?