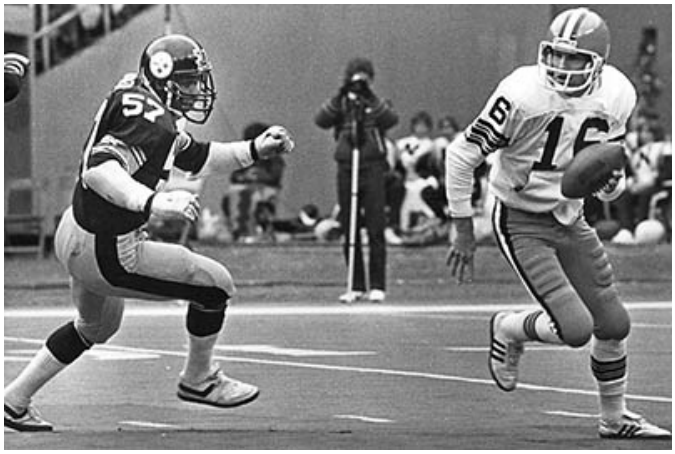
If you think it can't possibly get any worse for the 1-7 Browns, you're, sadly, wrong. It has been worse. Three times prior to this season the Browns have started out 1-7 or worse. When talking about failure and this franchise, there is always a precedent. So today we bring in Jesse Lamovsky to take a look back at the other three seasons in which the Browns started out 1-7 or worse. This isn't an attempt to throw some light from the past upon the darkness of today. It's just a grisly trip in the way-back machine. Climb aboard, if you dare.



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Let's look back at the other three seasons in which the Browns started out 1-7 or worse. There's an overview of the bad start (as well as the totality of the season itself), the main theme of the bad start, the bright spots amid the carnage and the aftermath; as in, how the Browns recovered from the bad start, if indeed they recovered at all. Blowouts are games the Browns lost by more than twenty points during the bad start. We'll draw some parallels between the four seasons in question as well.

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1984

Record after eight games: 1-7

Blowouts: One (33-0 @ Seattle, Week One)

Final Record: 5-11

Overview: Sam Rutigliano's head-coaching career was reduced to kindling in a whirlwind of defeat to open the 1984 season. The catalyst for the team's downfall after a promising 9-7 record in 1983 was the disappointing performance of Brian Sipe's successor Paul McDonald. The left-hander from USC passed for 3,472 yards but also threw 23 interceptions, each of which seemed to have devastating consequences for his team. At one point early in the season McDonald threw pick-sixes in three consecutive games. McDonald also fumbled 16 times and was sacked a then-franchise-record 53 times. In all fairness Cleveland's offensive line was a mess after Cody Risien went down with a knee injury in preseason *and* the receiving corps was one of the worst in the NFL- but McDonald didn't exactly help his own cause either.

Dominant Theme: Close losses. The 1984 Browns were 2-8 in games decided by seven points or less and lost eight games in which they were leading or tied in the fourth quarter- including five in the stretch that got Rutigliano fired and defensive coordinator Marty Schottenheimer elevated in his place. Cleveland finished second in the NFL in total defense in '84 and had a point differential of -47, which is actually pretty decent compared to the 5-11 record. They just couldn't close out games.

Bright Spots: Ozzie Newsome caught 89 passes for 1,001 yards, was first-team All-Pro and accounted for Cleveland's only Pro Bowl invitation. The youthful defense- every starter was 28 or younger- was outstanding, although it had a nasty habit of folding late in games thanks to an inadequate pass rush. The Browns also had a number of first-year players who would make a positive impact

in later years, most notably Earnest Byner, Brian Brennan and Frank Minnifield.

After the Bad Start: Under Schottenheimer the Browns went 4-4 in the second half of the 1984 season. The next year they went .500 at 8-8 but still managed to win the first of what would become four AFC Central Division Championships in five years. Within two years of the 1984 disaster the Browns would be one of the premier teams in football.

Verdict: A promising young team sabotaged by a turnover machine at quarterback and a head coach in the throes of a career meltdown.

1999

Record after eight games: 1-7

Blowouts: Two (43-0 vs. Pittsburgh, Week One; 34-3 @ St. Louis, Week Seven.)

Final Record: 2-14

Dominant Theme: Expansion football. First-year teams not named the Carolina Panthers or Jacksonville Jaguars are generally horrendous, and the '99 Browns were no exception. They finished the season ranked dead last in total offense, dead last in total defense, and were outscored by a whopping 220 points. In their first seven games, all losses, the Browns were beaten by an average score of 26-7. The fact that three of those games were against Super Bowl participants St. Louis (13-3) and Tennessee (13-3) and the team with the best record in the NFL, Jacksonville (14-2) didn't help matters. The Browns hadn't even learned to dog-paddle before they were thrown into the deep end of the pool.

Bright Spots: There weren't many. Rookies Tim Couch (15 touchdown passes, 13 interceptions) and Kevin Johnson (66 catches, 986 yards, eight touchdowns) showed promise on the offensive side, but that was pretty much it. No Browns made the Pro Bowl in '99; indeed, the new franchise wouldn't produce a home-grown Pro Bowler until the 2007 season. Of the eleven players selected by Cleveland in the 1999 Draft, only Daylon McCutcheon would still be with the team five years later.

After the Bad Start: Cleveland beat New Orleans in Week Eight on the Tim Couch-to-Kevin Johnson Hail Mary, stunned the Steelers in Three Rivers on Phil Dawson's game-winning field goal two weeks later, then lost its last six games to finish 2-14 and winless at home. Results aside, the Browns did play better football at the end of the 1999 season than they had at the beginning, averaging a respectable 19.6 points in those final six defeats. Any minute progress the team did make was wiped out in 2000, when the Browns went 3-13 and might have been worse than they'd been in '99.

Verdict: An expansion team, with all that implies.

1975

Record after eight games: 0-8

Blowouts: Three (42-10 vs. Minnesota, Week Two; 42-6 vs. Pittsburgh, Week Three; 40-10 vs. Houston, Week Four.)

Final Record: 3-11

Overview: Under first-year head coach Forrest Gregg the Browns got off to the worst start in franchise history on the way to what was at the time the worst season in franchise history. Cleveland lost its first nine games in 1975, including that troika of consecutive home losses listed above. The fracture point was quarterback play- its production on the offensive end and its prevention on the defensive end. Browns quarterbacks, led by the estimable Mike Phipps, combined for seven touchdowns and 23 interceptions. On the other side, a secondary depleted by Thom Darden's season-ending knee injury faced Ken Anderson, Fran Tarkenton, Terry Bradshaw, Bert Jones and Ken Stabler in the first nine weeks.

Dominant Theme: Great opponents. Not many teams in NFL history, good or bad, have played a more formidable schedule than the 1975 Browns. Nine of Cleveland's fourteen opponents finished with ten or more wins: AFC East Champion Baltimore (10-4), AFC West Champion Oakland (11-3), NFC Central Champion Minnesota (12-2) and two each against World Champion Pittsburgh (12-2), wild-card Cincinnati (11-3) and Houston (10-4.) Take away the games against the woeful Browns and the combined winning percentage of Cleveland's 1975 opponents is still .631. The Browns were a bad team in 1975, but the schedule makers didn't do them any favors either.

Bright Spots: Greg Pruitt had his first big year in 1975, rushing for 1,067 yards and scoring nine touchdowns. On the other side of the ball, defensive tackle Jerry Sherk made his third consecutive Pro Bowl, the only Cleveland Brown so honored that season. Wide receiver Reggie Rucker joined the Browns in 1975 and finished second in the NFL with 60 receptions.

After the Bad Start: After starting out 0-9 Cleveland won three of its last five games, including an upset of the playoff-bound Bengals . The next year, bolstered by an improved defense, a more favorable schedule and the emergence of Brian Sipe, the Browns went 9-5. Still, Cleveland wouldn't make a playoff appearance until 1980, by which time Forrest Gregg had long since been replaced by Sam Rutigliano.

Verdict: A team with some solid players (Pruitt, Sherk, Rucker, Clarence Scott, Thom Darden, Doug Dieken) but not nearly enough to overcome terrible quarterback play, a sub-par defense and a ridiculously overloaded schedule. In another conference this team might have achieved mediocrity- but not in the AFC in general or in the Central Division in particular.

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First-Year Head Coaches: Three of the four slowest-starting Browns teams were led by first-year coaches, with the exception being the 1984 team under seventh-year coach Sam Rutigliano. Forrest Gregg and Chris Palmer were both on their first NFL head-coaching jobs; Gregg had no head-coaching experience of any kind before taking the Cleveland job while Palmer had amassed four seasons as a small-college coach in the 1980's at the University of New Haven and Boston University. Eric Mangini, of course, spent three years as the head coach of the New York Jets, with middling success.

Poor Quarterback Play: It's said that the NFL is a quarterback's league, and if that's the case, the struggles of the '75, '84, '99 and '09 teams are no mystery. For the most part, the quarterback position on those squads was, and is, a bottomless pit of suck. Mike Phipps, Paul McDonald and Derek Anderson were and are disasters; Tim Couch had decent statistics but was plagued by his own inexperience as well as the ineffectiveness of his supporting case, particularly on the offensive line. (How would *you* like to have Scott Rehberg protecting your blind side?)

Tough Early Schedules: All four of the teams on this list, including the 2009 team, have faced early schedules that weren't exactly conducive to a club experiencing growing pains. The rugged slates faced by the 1975 and '99 teams have been documented; the 1984 team played its first three games against teams that finished the season with a combined record of 35-13, while the '09 team has also faced tough competition in the early going.

(That's not to make excuses for Eric Mangini's reign of error. No non-expansion NFL team should be getting beat by an average score of 26-9 every time it takes the field. And while the schedule has been tough, it hasn't been *that* tough. Green Bay and Chicago are eminently flawed.)

Improved Second Halves: Whatever the reasons- roster health and chemistry, a more forgiving schedule or a coaching change- the 1975, '84 and '99 teams all played significantly better in the second half of the season than they had in the first. The 1975 team finished 3-4 after starting 0-7; the 1984 team finished 4-4 after starting 1-7, and while the 1999 team had the same 1-7 record in the last eight games as it had in the first, it was a more competitive squad down the stretch.

Time will tell if the 2009 team follows this trend. I rather doubt it will, although the record may not show it. None of the previous teams on this list had quit on their coach; by all evidence, this one has. With bottom-feeders Kansas City, Jacksonville and Oakland remaining on the schedule there are opportunities to add to that skinny "1" on the win side of the ledger. And frankly, that might not be a good thing. Some cheap wins late this season could very well buy Eric Mangini another season... and I might just be writing this same column this time next year.