Let's not kid anyone here. The Browns are a laughingstock and deservedly so. But in that they aren't alone. The NFL this season is a breeding ground of embarrassment. The Detroit Lions have exactly 1 win in two years. St. Louis, Washington, Tampa Bay and Kansas City have collectively 5 wins. Yet it's the Browns being singled out most weeks as the picture of ineptitude while their idiot cousins are being ignored. In Gary's latest, he says its because this Browns franchise has inexplicably been just as bad at public relations as they are playing the game of football.

With Eric Mangini effectively in charge of every little thing coming out of Berea these days, it's small wonder that the Browns aren't any better off the field as they are on it.

All the missteps and high-minded disasters on the field have been well chronicled. But less is said it seems about how poorly owner Randy Lerner, through abdication to Mangini, has managed the Cleveland Browns brand.

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the New Orleans Saints. (By the way, isn't one of the greatest stats of this season the fact that the Browns offense has only 5 touchdowns while the New Orleans defense has 7? In fact, this may be the greatest stat of all time.)

Yet it's the Browns being singled out most weeks as the picture of ineptitude while their idiot cousins are being ignored. Part of the reason has to do with the housecleaning that Mangini and Lerner undertook shortly after Mangini was named head coach. In that purge, two key members of the public relation staff were let go, ostensibly for cost cutting reasons, leaving that department a bit short-handed.

Whether Mangini had anything to do with those firings isn't exactly clear although the timing relative to his hire suggests that he at least knew it was coming and wasn't of a mind to stop it. But what is far more clear is that Mangini, as major king domo, is now responsible for the approved messaging emanating from Berea.

It's pretty apparent how that's going. Listen to a Mangini press conference, if you can. It's as painful as watching the Browns play on Sundays. Mangini steps to the microphone with a few opening remarks of little consequence and then spends the rest of the time either ignoring questions completely or giving half answers, at best. It's a pretty damning display, really, and sets the overall organizational tone of don't ask and don't tell.

The Browns are in crisis and instead of addressing it publicly, directly and honestly, they've developed a bunker mentality befitting of the head coach who apparently came out of the womb believing that the other babies in the nursery were trying to steal his secrets about potty training.

Surely Mangini's communications about the various quarterback changes throughout this season is a prime example. From treating the identity of his season opening quarterback as a state secret to explaining his various rationales

for the subsequent benches has been loopy enough to leave even the most cynical among us aghast.

Then there's been the whole George Kokinis was he fired or is he just in hiding thing. But as it turns out, these are just the tip of the iceberg. For the kids in college, the handling of the so-called protest being "organized" by a pair of long time fans serves as a case study in Public Relations 101 on exactly what not to do.

Anyone with a lick of sense knows these so-called fan protests are as trite and cliché as the bets that the mayors of the opposing cities make at Super Bowl time. Such protests never work on a large scale because the last thing most ticket-buying fans want to do when their team is in the toilet is call attention to the fact that they were dumb enough to buy the tickets in the first place. As for those fans who aren't currently funding the enterprise, what do they have to complain about anyway?

Properly ignored, this protest would have died its natural death. In a nutshell here is how the Browns handled it instead. Lerner met with the two for a couple of hours and let them know that he really cares about the franchise and really wants to get it right. We know that not because Lerner or anyone associated with the team told us but because that's what the two "fans" told us. It's an interesting approach, public relations practiced one person at a time.

Given how quickly the Browns fan base has been dwindling the last few years, meeting with every remaining fan with an ax to grind probably isn't the overwhelming task it once might have been. But is that really the best way to win the hearts and minds of those you're asking to pay to clean up your messes?

Instead of getting out ahead of the story and shaping the message in a way they wanted it shaped, the Browns through the sheer incompetence allowed the two fans to become the team's unofficial spokesmen instead. And their message:

Randy's a good guy who cares but nothing he said convinced us we're wrong so guess what, we're protesting anyway.

More strategically, though, Lerner going rogue on this demonstrated that it's not just the big things the Browns get wrong, it's the little things, too. Lerner essentially gave legitimacy to a nonsensical protest that always had far less traction than imagined by giving them a personal forum. Now these two have become the face of the franchise and Lerner's little talking act all but guaranteed that they'll be the face of this week's broadcast, and not in a good way. There's a way for an owner to connect directly with the fans but I'm pretty sure this isn't it.

Lerner would have been far better served by using Bill Bonsiewicz, the team's spokesman, or, better yet, the services of a real expert crisis communicator to develop a more thoughtful plan for addressing fan frustration.

Had that happened, the meeting might still have taken place but certainly not in the way it did, privately and without follow-up. If Lerner really is the frustrated fan committed to righting this ship isn't it better to hear that directly and constantly instead of indirectly and randomly through emails and unofficial sources?

But because Lerner knows more about scarves than he does organizational development it's never occurred to him that having Mangini at the top of the pyramid, especially with George Kokinis in witness protection, essentially puts Mangini in charge of still another team function for which he's uniquely unqualified.

The Browns are a public relations challenge but no more so than any number of other teams, all of whom suffer from the same problem-organizational incompetence. Years of bad decisions piled one upon the other are what cause teams or companies to tank like a Lindsey Lohan movie. But the problems aren't insurmountable.

In the law, there's a saying that if you don't have the facts in your favor, argue the law. If you don't have the law in your favor, argue the facts. If you don't have either in your favor, argue public policy. Right now all the Browns have to argue is public policy and instead they clam up because that's the personal comfort zone of their football czar. It's a strategy that isn't serving either him or the team any better than the team's draft strategy last spring.