For months now, Cleveland Browns fans have been sold an almost mystical vision of a process supposedly underway in Berea. With no visible progress in any aspect of its operations being apparent to the naked eye, fans are essentially told to trust the greater forces at work that they can't see. In Gary's latest, he says this is all a fantasy. And that after 10 years of trying, this franchise is now in worse shape than when it re-entered the league in 1999.

For months now, Cleveland Browns fans have been sold an almost mystical vision of a process supposedly underway in Berea. With no visible progress in any aspect of its operations being apparent to the naked eye, fans are essentially told to trust the greater forces at work that they can't see.

In this fantasy taking place under the direction of owner Randy Lerner, head coach Eric Mangini has assumed the role of Shivas Irons and a yet-unnamed football czar looking to arise from a ravine near Berea taking the form of football's version of Seamus MacDuff. Welcome to Golf in the Kingdom, NFL-style.

One imagines a night of whiskey during the interview process that led to Mangini's hiring, with Mangini explaining to a drunken and gullible Lerner how true gravity is only achieved through losing, then winning. Mangini's a shaman all right.

But in this version of Football in the Kingdom, the end doesn't result in any greater understanding and certainly doesn't bring inner peace, not to the Lerner and certainly not to the fans. All it does is make you long for 1999.

Forget the mysticism. Forget the whiskey. Getting to the heart of the matter requires no such enhancements. After 10 years of trying, this franchise is now in worse shape than when it re-entered the league in 1999.

Way to go O-hi-o.

I know, I know, people say that calling this team worse than the 1999 team is hyperbole in order to make a point about Mangini. Actually, it's not. It's just fact. Indeed, it's hard to fathom that the 1999 team and the 2009 team being in the same conversation except as contrasts.

And actually, that is the case but in reverse with the 2009 team being compared unfavorably with its 1999 cousin.

With probably better personnel, the 2009 Browns likely wouldn't be favored in a matchup with their 1999 cousin. The line in Vegas would probably be 1999 Browns -5 points and an over/under of 28 points.

Call Strat-O-Matic.

Here's the proof. Compare, for example, Tim Couch with the combined efforts of Brady Quinn and Derek Anderson. Couch started 14 games and went 223-399 for 2,447 yards, 15 touchdowns and 14 interceptions.

He also had 267 yards rushing and 1 touchdown.

That means Couch was completing 56% of his passes, averaged slightly more than 6 yards per pass and had, relatively speaking, a respectable rating of 73.167.

Through 11 games this season, Quinn and Anderson are a combined 161-329 for 1593 yards, 7 touchdowns and 14 interceptions. Projecting that over 14 games, which is the number of games Couch started, the pair will have completed 205 passes in 419 attempts for 2028 yards with 9 touchdowns and 18 interceptions.

That translates to a completion percentage of around 49%, an average of just over 4 yards per pass and a quarterback rating of 52.282.

Now, you can argue that it's not fair to combine Quinn and Anderson because Anderson's unparalleled awfulness is dragging down Quinn. Fair point. Using just Quinn's numbers and projecting them over 14 games looks like this: 205-378 for 1964 yards, 11 touchdowns, 11 interceptions.

It boosts the completion percentage to just over 54%, his yards per pass average is now just over 5 and his rating is 66.5.

Across the board, though, he's still worse than Couch.

This isn't really to compare Quinn and Couch. It's to illustrate that this offense is worse, far worse, than the 1999 version and for it you can thank Mangini and his rookie offensive coordinator, Brian Daboll.

Where this really shows up is in the receivers. There has been much talk this season that the offense really hasn't stood a chance since trading away players like Braylon Edwards and Kellen Winslow.

Maybe it was addition by subtraction for intangible reasons, but it's hardly the reason for the apologists to give Mangini a pass on the miserable product he's constructed.

The 1999 team started two rookies in Kevin Johnson and Darrin Chiaverini. The third receiver was Leslie Shepherd, who was in his 5th season, although Shepherd did start several games as well.

Johnson, did I mention he was a rookie, had 66 catches for nearly 1000 yards and

8 touchdowns.

Chiaverini had 44 catches for almost 500 yards and 4 touchdowns and Shepherd added 23 more for nearly 300 yards.

The tight end on that team was the memorable Irv Smith, who was in his 6th season.

At least he had 24 catches for 222 yards and 1 touchdown.

If you want to understand the lack of depth on that roster, consider the rest of the receivers on it: Damon Dunn, David Dunn, Damon Gibson and Ronnie Powell, a group arguably more pitiful than the current roster. Yet on an aggregate basis the receivers then far exceeded this year's model.

Mangini's team starts one rookie, Mohammed Massaquoi and, essentially a rookie wide receiver in the form of Josh Cribbs. Singularly or combined, they aren't likely to surpass Johnson in either receptions or yards, let alone touchdowns.

Combined the two have 43 receptions, which translates to about 63 for the season, and 602 yards, which translates into around 822 yards for the season.

They have two touchdowns among them and that translates to 3 for the season.

At tight end, the Browns have used Robert Royal, Michael Gaines, Greg Estandia and Steve Heiden. None of them will surpass the relatively

limited production of Smith in 1999. The rest of the Browns receivers, with the exception of Brian Robiskie, aren't likely to be any more known than those who filled out the 199 roster; Ray Ventrone, Jake Allen and Mike Furrey.

What's also worth noting is that despite being better than this year's team, the Browns' 1999 offense was still objectively awful. Like this year's group, it was last in the league in virtually every meaningful metric. Yet it still averaged 2 points per game more than this year's group.

This just proves that there actually are subtle levels of awfulness.

Want to turn to the defense? The apologists can protect Mangini by pointing to the injuries the Browns have suffered on defense this year but in doing so it's instructive to remember they already were the worst defense in the league before Shaun Rogers was lost.

They were also the worst defense in the league before D'Qwell Jackson went down.

They already were the worst defense before Brodney Pool came down with another concussion.

In fact, they started off the year as the worst defense in the league and haven't improved since irrespective of the combination.

The Cleveland Browns of 1999 were likewise the league's worst defense. They were, in a sense, technically worse than the 2009 model but by a fraction, giving up 27 points per game, two more than this year.

But as a measure of how offense and defense work together, note that the point differential between the Browns and its weekly competition is actually worse this year.

Right now the Browns are losing games by just over 14 points a game.

In 1999, it was by 13 points a game. Overall, call it at most a draw.

Again, though, the far larger point is the fact that 10 years later the Browns haven't escaped their past despite huge advantages that the 1999 Browns didn't have. Recall, for example, that the 1999 Browns were officially re-born in 1998 when Al Lerner was awarded the franchise. That means it had just 1 year to put in an infrastructure capable of putting some semblance of a team on the field. The consensus then is the same as now: the NFL seemed to deliberately stack the odds against the Browns in the early years of its rebirth.

That can hardly be used as an excuse any more. This year's Browns have had a full 10 years under their belts. They've had all manner of advantage in those 10 years, from high draft picks to a well financed owner who could supply the cash for nearly any free agent the team coveted. And yet, 10 years later as a franchise they are in worse shape than 1999.

This franchise doesn't need holy water or some international man of mystery to solve it's problems nor is it going to turnaround over night, not with this owner and not with this coach anyway. What it needs is for this owner to get one decision right: his next hire.

It needn't be a closer version Shivas Irons or Seamus MacDuff then he currently has.

It just needs to a competent, credible football mind who can walk in and get things done.

And if his first move is to close the book on the hoodoo and voodoo of a fraud like Mangini, so much the better.