There are probably a million or more ways to look at the Cleveland Browns' 2009 season and probably even more conclusions that could be drawn. But one thing that is undeniable. It's been a long, strange trip indeed. Now that the season is over, Gary Benz thought the best thing to do first was to try and make some sense of what we all just experienced. To follow the journey, really, that new club president Mike Holmgren had to take to get himself up to speed before deciding whether or not to keep head coach Eric Mangini. So he hammered out a superb four part retrospective on the 2009 season. And we bring you Part I today. Enjoy!

Note: The Cleveland Browns 2009 season was one for the ages. It could be summed up in as little as one word "oy" or 100 million. I've opted for somewhere between the two. It may be that all of you, or most anyway, are so tired of this past season that you'd rather have your toe nails pulled than read another word about it. Believe me, I understand. But for those brave few willing to go along on one final journey with me, just know that I appreciate your courage and have tried to make it worth your while.

Part I. This is the Part Where the Browns Franchise Finds Itself Walking Alone, in the Middle of a Storm, on a Road to Nowhere, Again.

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I promised to write a book about the season, and that might come in time. But I thought the best thing to do first was to try and make some sense of what we all just experienced. I wanted to follow the journey, really, that new club president Mike Holmgren had to take to get himself up to speed before deciding whether or not to keep head coach Eric Mangini.

In more ways than not, the 2009 season was worse than the 2008 season, although it's a pretty close call. The Browns entered the 2008 with lofty expectations from the national media and ended up crashing and burning on the heels of 4 years of abject mismanagement on and off the field.

That was a season that had Braylon Edwards as its poster child. A Pro Bowler in 2007, Edwards developed the swagger and entitlement mentality reminiscent of most of today's professional athletes. But Edwards never did develop the professionalism he actually needed to sustain his one good season. Instead he was lackadaisical in approach and it showed on the field in the form of one dropped pass after another. It was the story of the entire team, actually.

Edwards' failures fairly summed up the end of the road for Romeo Crennel and Phil Savage, but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. The story of the 2009 season actually starts with Crennel and Savage still in charge, sort of.

A lot about placing the 2009 season in context depends on when you think last season ended. For me, it was December 28, 2008. That was when the Browns played their last game of the Phil Savage/Romeo Crennel era and it ended, exquisitely, with a 31-0 pasting at the hands of the Pittsburgh Steelers, the team's most hated rival.

In that game the Browns set the NFL's record for longest streak without scoring an

offensive touchdown and also had the dubious distinction of being the first Browns' team to be shut out in consecutive games.

In my recap of that game I noted that by hitting what looked like rock bottom (and it was, but for that year only) in that manner they did, the Browns guaranteed that their fans would be dealt a steady diet of Kevin Harland and Rich Gannon as announcers for 2009. It's exactly what they got, with the occasional Randy Cross thrown in for good measure.

The loss to the Steelers and the dispirited way that season ended raised the most obvious question, where do the Browns go from here? The worry then, fully justified soon thereafter, was that owner Randy Lerner hadn't managed to get anything right yet and was now putting himself of overseeing the next makeover. Would it end well? How could it?

As it turned out, Savage's fate was already sealed before the kickoff of that woeful Pittsburgh game. Lerner had fired him prior to the game but didn't bother to tell anyone until after, apparently not sensing the irony in claiming that Savage's termination was due, in part, to poor communication skills.

The mistake Lerner had made in Savage was a common one for Lerner. When hiring based on established track records was called for, Lerner instead opted for hope. Lerner figured Savage could fit comfortably into the general manager's job simply because he had sat at the feet of Ozzie Newsome in Baltimore. What Lerner never realized was that Savage was more comfortable with stats than people. Newsome probably is still laughing at that miscalculation and thanking God during every waking moment that he left for Baltimore when Modell did.

Savage left a legacy of some decent draft choices (virtually every key contributor for the Browns this season, for example, was brought in by Savage) and a bevy of botched ones as well. Ultimately, it was Savage's inability to be a steady, calming influence and face of the organization that was his undoing. He had embarrassed

Lerner and the Browns in nearly consecutive weeks with his handling of the news of Kellen Winslow's staph infection and compounded the problem first by issuing a perfunctory apology and then by sending a profane email in response to one written by a disgruntled Browns fan fed up with what he had been seeing on the field. Again, his apology was perfunctory, as if he'd done nothing wrong in the first place.

As for Crennel, the shoe dropped on him after the final game. In typical Lerner fashion it was through a written statement and again without any appreciation for irony in that he claimed he fired Savage a day earlier, in part, due to his lack of leadership skills.

Crennel was a very decent man. Approachable and serious minded, Crennel treated the players like men and found himself being rewarded in the same way parents are rewarded for trusting that their 17-year old won't break into the liquor cabinet while they're away for the weekend. His teams lacked discipline of almost every sort and his tenure can be summed up in perhaps the two words that described the team's most common penalty, "false start."

Lerner's first thought in trying to replace Crennel was a good one, Bill Cowher. But Cowher told Lerner before that fateful Pittsburgh game that he didn't plan to coach in 2009 and stuck to his word. Lerner found himself thus at a crossroads. Having failed by hiring a lifelong assistant like Crennel, Lerner could either find someone who had head coaching experience or someone who had head coaching ability. Naturally, he opted for the former when he needed to opt for the latter.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves, too. Certainly Lerner's first task surely would be to find a general manager before tackling the issue of who might be the Browns' next head coach. That's the right order, isn't it?

As it turned out, it wasn't the right order at all. Shortly after the 2008 season

ended, the New York Jets apparently did Lerner the biggest favor of all and fired Eric Mangini as its head coach. Mangini was given the nickname of Mangenius when he took a 4-12 Jets team and turned it into a 10-6 playoff team in his first season.

But that nickname quickly faded when the Jets reverted back to form the following season at 4-12 and then, in Mangini's last season, started 8-3 and then lost its last 5 games to miss the playoffs. It was time, general manager Mike Tannebaum said, to move where all teams eventually need to move to, destination new direction. That's pretty damning stuff, actually, just 3 years into the direction they were on with Mangini.

For Lerner, Mangini had the two attributes he most coveted: a connection with Bill Belichick and head coaching experience. That was the sum total of the due diligence he performed. But that may not have been even Lerner's biggest mistake. That would be reserved for letting Mangini pick his new boss, which he did in the form of George Kokinis, the former Baltimore Ravens pro personnel director.

On the surface it sounded like Kokinis was Savage redux, right down to the resume. But that wasn't exactly true. As a pro personnel director, Kokinis' focus was on current players in the league, not college players. In other words, he wouldn't be much help in the draft.

Putting aside the problem with letting the subordinate hire his own boss, Kokinis was an odd selection because the Browns' biggest trouble area was the draft. What we didn't know at the time was that Mangini hired Kokinis specifically because he lacked that skill. It let Mangini wander free around the draft. But that's getting ahead of ourselves, too. I've got to stop doing that.

Mangini's official hiring came on January 9, 2009 and marked the first time, probably, that any NFL team had elevated its former ball boy to head coach.

Lerner, of course, didn't announce the decision personally. That task fell to Mike Kennan, the club's president, a title Kennan would relinquish once Holmgren was hired.

The courtship of Mangini was quick, particularly so considering that no other team looking for a head coach at the time had even given Mangini a second thought. At his introductory press conference Mangini said all the right and usual things. But the proof, as I noted then, would be in whether he does the right things. Call it foreshadowing. But even greater foreshadowing came in the form of a question posed by the Jets fan who ran the FireEricMangini.com website: who in their right mind would replace one ex-Patriot flop with another ex-Patriot flop? Destiny, thy name is Lerner.

Part II. This is the Part Where Mangini Settles In and Others Suddenly Become Unsettled

After the hiring of Mangini and Kokinis, the rest of January was relatively quiet, unless you happened to work in the Browns' front office. Blaming the economy, Lerner approved the layoff of 15 employees, including the public relations staff. Meanwhile, there were a host of castoffs able to ride out the economy in slightly better fashion in the form of Lerner castoffs still owed millions, castoffs like Carmen Policy, Butch Davis, Phil Savage and Romeo Crennel.

Maybe these 15 layoffs were part of a tanking economy. But to say that they weren't in part the result of a makeover being overseen by Mangini would be wrong.

At the time Lerner was having staffers clean out their desks, he was allowing Mangini to have the Berea complex physically overhauled at a considerable cost. Of all the changes that occurred, the one that caused the most controversy, though, was his painting over a mural of Browns' legends. Some saw it as Mangini purposely trying to break with the past. Others saw it as Mangini wanting

to let everyone know who was calling the shots. They were both right.

Meanwhile, Mangini was keeping many of Crennel's assistants dangling, insisting that they be held to the letter of their contracts while preventing them from interviewing elsewhere. Part of that was because he hadn't yet finalized his own staff. Part of it, maybe the bigger part of it, was the simple fact that it was saving the Browns money. Per league rules, if the Browns fired the coaches before their contracts were completed and the coaches found other employment elsewhere at a lower salary, the Browns would be on the hook for the difference. A coach that resigns, however, has no such luck.

At the very least, it set a tone. In retrospect, it was the beginning of a number of blunders Mangini would make that made him one of the most unpopular hires in Browns' history, at least for the first 3 months of the regular season, anyway.

As February dawned, Mangini gave his first full press conference. It was a virtuoso performance as he talked often and said nothing. He mentioned the mural and how that was all one big misunderstanding and said a few nice things about D'Qwell Jackson and Josh Cribbs, but not much else. Actually it was unclear why Mangini had the press conference in the first place, unless it was to set the ground rules with the media for what was to come. It did and Mangini never got the media back on his side for the rest of the season.

Kokinis wasn't much better. A few weeks after the Mangini press conference came Kokinis to publicly declare that he and Mangini were on the same page without ever giving anyone a clue what page that actually was. As it turned out, they didn't know themselves.

But one thing was clear from the Kokinis press conference. Mangini had placed him on a short leash. Kokinis wouldn't discuss, for example, whether the Browns planned on placing the franchise tag on safety Sean Jones, about their only free agent worth trying to keep. Likewise, he wouldn't discuss his thinking on Derek

Anderson other than to say "you really have to fit Derek within the whole structure of the whole football team." It's still one of my favorite quotes ever because it precisely captures the guise of saying something while actually saying nothing at all. But to Kokinis' credit, it was exactly what Mangini wanted him to say.

Someone who was far less shy in talking substantively was Scott Pioli, the new general manager in Kansas City. Talking freely at the combine in Indianapolis, Pioli went on to praise in almost over-the-top fashion Detroit's hiring of Jim Schwartz as head coach. It wasn't just that this was praise at the exclusion of Cleveland's near simultaneous hiring of Mangini so much as it was insight on why Pioli wouldn't take the general manager's job in Cleveland.

Pioli and Mangini are like oil and water at this point owing mostly to Mangin's role in the whole Spygate affair while Pioli was in New England. But more to the point, speculation is that Pioli wanted Lerner to consider hiring Schwartz in Cleveland as part of the package of bringing Pioli in but Lerner instead was fixated on Mangini. It was the deal killer of all deal killers.

As for Mangini and Kokinis at the combine, they were their usual insightful selves. The Browns were either interested in a running back or maybe it was a defensive end. They were going to keep Anderson or maybe trade him. They'd consider moving Josh Cribbs to safety or maybe running back. What the two didn't realize is that the only ones interested in the Browns' plans were their fans. The rest of the league and billions worldwide could have cared less.

Already getting off on the wrong foot with the fans, the media and the holdovers from the front office, Mangini decided to go for the grand slam by taking on the players. In the most highly publicized snub since Don Knotts wasn't nominated as best actor for his role in The Incredible Mr. Limpett, Mangini ignored the hulking Shaun Rogers at a charity function in late February, claiming he just didn't see him.

Mangini's explanation wasn't believable because the two almost literally bumped shoulders in their bids to ignore each other. Rogers claimed he felt disrespected but what was really going on behind the scenes was that Rogers (and other players) had gotten a letter from Mangini a few days earlier that they would be required to report for the team's upcoming workouts in mid-March at their playing weight.

Rogers, who struggles with weight issues and never met a Boston crème pie he could resist, felt disrespected because he always answered the bell during the season.

To some, Rogers was just acting out his nickname of Big Baby. As it turned out, it was just another misstep by Mangini; a failure to understand the pulse of his new team.

Meanwhile, in an effort to reclaim some of the draft picks lost by the previous regime, Mangini (or was it Kokinis?) traded Kellen Winslow, Jr. to Tampa Bay for a second round pick in the coming draft and a fifth round pick in 2010. Ultimately, it was a trade of mutual convenience. Winslow wanted his contract renegotiated and Mangini wanted draft picks. Tampa Bay was the willing dupe.

In some sense, Winslow was missed. Mostly, though, he wasn't. Winslow wasn't happy with the Browns for a number of reasons and wanted a fresh start elsewhere. Whatever skills Winslow still has, they aren't ever going to be what his college potential promised due mostly to injuries. A team rebuilding didn't need someone like Winslow. Of course either did Tampa Bay but they went on to re-do his contract anyway, making him about $20 million richer. Meanwhile, somewhere Josh Cribbs steamed.

When the NFL's mid-winter meetings hit in early March, the Browns were mostly bystanders. That was a good thing. It was a refreshing assessment that signing a high-priced free agent wasn't what this team needed. There were just too many

holes and not enough cap space to go around. It was something that Savage never really understood as he went about throwing money at the likes of Donte Stallworth the season before.