The first two installments of Gary Benz's excellent retrospective on the 2009 season of the Cleveland Browns dealt with all the drama that unfolded before the season, and lord knows there was plenty of it in the wake of Romeo Crennel's firing and the hiring of Eric Mangini. Today, in Part III, Gary starts to delve into when the games started being played on the field as opposed to off of it. And from the first preseason game on, it was not a pretty picture for the Browns and their fans. The team got off to a historically anemic start, putting a significant amount of pressure on Mangini and his staff.

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.

Installment #1

Installment #2

Part V. This is the Part Where the Games Begin, On and Off the Field

The record will show that Eric Mangini's first loss with the Browns was that 17-0 disaster against the Green Bay Packers. After changing almost everything in the offseason, the Browns started the new season exactly like they finished the old-dispirited, confused and giving little effort.

As for the so-called quarterback competition, Brady Quinn looked better than Derek Anderson in the same way that spinach looks better than asparagus.

Neither player seemed particularly adept at taking the wheel.

Oh yea, in two themes that would be repeated again and again, Braylon Edwards complained that he was being over scrutinized every time he dropped a pass and Cribbs looked like the only true professional on the field. And in even more foreshadowing, Channel 3 ended up buying all the unsold tickets in order to be able to broadcast the game.

Even after the stock market had long since crashed some folks just can't help themselves in making bad investments.

Inside the Berea complex, Mangini was becoming all touchy-feely, trying to build camaraderie by rearranging the locker room. He inter-mixed offensive and defensive players, veterans and rookies.

His aim was to build familiarity with each other, if nothing else.

With all the new faces, it couldn't hurt.

The Browns turned things around a bit in their second preseason game, beating the even more woeful Detroit Lions. Anderson was his usual uneven self, looking sharp initially and then finding it difficult to complete the shortest of passes.

Quinn handled himself better overall but was his usual unspectacular self.

Two weeks into the preseason and the Browns still were not close to naming a starting quarterback.

As the media fretted for any sort of insight from Mangini that was never going to come, other mysteries abounded. Shaun Rogers wasn't practicing and no one would say why. Ryan Tucker was a similar mystery as was Brodney Pool.

But the Browns did manage to beat the Tennessee Titans in their third preseason game. The Titans outplayed the Browns at every turn but couldn't convert their opportunities into touchdowns. As it turned out, that's how the entire Titans' regular season went as well.

With neither Anderson nor Quinn playing well enough to be declared the undisputed champion of Mangini's training camp version of American Idol, focus instead turned to the running game. The Titans' game made it clear that Jamal Lewis had lost a step and that James Davis might be a star in the making.

Everyone wondered about the fate of Jerome Harrison, who played little because of an injury and ended up surviving when Davis became injured in one of Mangini's post-practice opportunity periods.

Rumors swirled that Davis had been hit by a player while not wearing shoulder pads, a rumor that turned out not to be true. Still, the league and the Players Association investigated.

As the preseason ended, Mangini went right up to the league imposed 6 p.m. deadline before disclosing his final roster cuts, though it was hard to understand why. Gone were Charles Ali, Isaac Sowells and Phil Hubbard. How tough could those decision have been?

With the season getting ready to start, I reluctantly agreed to make a prediction, which I try never to do Yet as I look back, the only thing I got wrong was the record, although isn't that the whole point of predictions?
Anyway,

I wrote: "I don't think the [2007] Browns were really as bad as their record...I think they were a 7-9 team coached down to a 4-12 record.

Just paying attention and being more organized is good for a victory or two.

I also think Mangini has a better command of the entire operations and is far more detail-oriented.

The team will be better prepared each week....When I put all that together...I start to think that Mangini can get this team back to where its talent level properly is: 7-9.

Fans will see it as improvement.

I see it as just getting back to square one.

But if it gives this team hope and is a stepping stone to a better future, then it all will have been worth it.

If it doesn't it's time to start handicapping who the next head coach might be."

A few things about that prediction I'd like to clear up. First, except for the record, I hit on most of what this season has been about.

Mangini is more detail-oriented and in better command of the overall operations.

Where he fell short was that he couldn't get this team back to its previous level.

Nonetheless, because the Browns finished relatively strong against relatively weak teams, fans saw it as progress.

I still see it as just getting back to square one, at best.

Mangini continued to play the competitive advantage trump card by refusing to name a starting quarterback with the opening game only a few days away. Word leaked out by that Friday, but it wasn't as if the Vikings were all that worried.

They went on to drill the Browns 34-20.

On the plus side, the Browns scored a touchdown on offense, something they hadn't done for the last half of 2008.

While the Browns played well in the first half, they fell apart late under the crush of silly mistakes and uninspired play, leaving fans with the same aftertaste of season past. After the game and in the entire run up to the Broncos game, Mangini apologized for not getting his players to finish the game and for running Cribbs out of the wildcat formation one too many times. Edwards, meanwhile, trying to appear his mature best, took the blame for a Quinn interception.

Meanwhile he was still dropping balls thrown right at him and blaming the fans for the scrutiny.

All in all, it wasn't a very encouraging start.

Part VI. This Is The Part Where Things Start Going Really Badly.

Before beginning the prep work for Denver in earnest, Mangini found out that he was suddenly $25,000 lighter as the result of a fine was levied by the NFL for not properly disclosing the extent of Brett Favre's injuries while with the Jets. That works out to about 17 water bottles (see below).

The fine was a sweet little twist of the screw by Favre. It was clear that Favre was injured in the latter parts of 2008 and yet his injury status was downplayed by the Jets. He then let it drop casually in a conversation with reporters while in Minnesota that the Jets were

fully aware that he had a torn bicep muscle. I'm sure Bill Belichick was smiling somewhere. After the usual NFL investigation Mangini, the Jets and Jets general manager Mike Tannebaum all were fined.

Mangini, of course, never addressed the issue publicly but the Browns' injury disclosures suddenly became more plentiful and more detailed.

The rest of the week didn't get any better for Mangini as the Denver Broncos made easy work of the Browns, 27-6. With that loss, the Browns kept in tact the NFL's longest drought for not scoring on an opening drive and the NFL's third-longest losing streak. They also failed to score a touchdown on offense, starting a new streak in that department.

On the Broncos' side of the ball, new head coach Josh McDaniels looked positively brilliant for trading Cutler in favor of Kyle Orton. All Orton did was chew up the Browns secondary, something nearly every quarterback in the NFL likewise accomplished. But what was most clear on this day was that turning around this ship wasn't just a matter of imposing discipline and order.

It was and remains a matter of getting better players.

Now here's where I digress for a moment to address all those who think that I'm just about bashing Mangini. I noted after the Denver game that trying to assess Mangini in the context of the talent he had would be difficult.

Moreover, I noted that it would take more than one off-season and a few games into the next to fix this mess.

Mangini's fate, I posited then hinged on whether he could make his team more competitive than the expansion team fans saw 11 years earlier.

A very fair assessment, indeed.

When a season is as miserable as this past year, it's hard to find the actual low points. But you could make a pretty fair case that the Browns' third game of the season, an embarrassing 34-3 loss to the Ravens, was it. More than all the mistakes being made, it was clear that the players gave up.

At halftime, Mangini had seen enough of Quinn to send him to the bench for however long it would take to ensure that he couldn't earn a bonus for playing in 70% of the team's offensive plays.

This would represent the game when people started to wonder in earnest whether Mangini really was the right person for this team.

At that moment the Browns looked in as much disarray, if not more, than at any time in 2008, which is a pretty bold statement. Mangini was being criticized for all of the petty discipline he imposed, like the $1,500+ fine on a player (Braylon Edwards) for not paying for a bottle of water at the team hotel (in retrospect, fully justified), and players were filing grievances against him by the score.

Inside the locker room, there were the former Jets still supporting the person giving them a job and then there was everyone else. Then there was the matter of yanking Quinn as he did.

After conducting one of the worst open competitions of any position in any sport, Mangini assured that neither player would be ready for the season and it showed.

Meanwhile, Mangini was spending what seemed like most of his time justifying his decision to go with Anderson by highlighting individual plays, such as that good decision he made on 3rd down, while ignoring the other warning signs, like all the interceptions.

In all and with all the changes that had been made, it was hard to believe that the Browns were actually worse than the previous season,

yet there they were and now Mangini was again retrenching.

The reason this Ravens loss was so important is that it serves to remind those who claim progress has been made that the progress has been only in the form of getting this team back up to the depths it sank to in 2008.

Despite a week of controversy, a constant in Berea this past season, the Browns rebounded the next week in Cincinnati. No, they didn't win.

But they took the Bengals to overtime before losing 23-20.

The Browns held a late 20-14 lead but the defense collapsed with 1:44 remaining, also a season-long theme.

The Bengals could have won it in regulation but Shaun Rogers showed off one of his specialties, the blocked kick.

Meanwhile Anderson couldn't move the Browns into field goal position to win the game.

Anderson, now inserted as starting quarterback, started slow but then repeatedly found a wide-open Mohamed Massaquoi, who had 8 catches for 148 yards. Jerome Harrison, re-emerging as he occasionally does, rushed for 121 yards on 29 carries.

For his efforts, Harrison was back on the bench the next week.

For all the giddiness the loss brought to Browns' fans, they were treated to an even better gift a few days later in the form of the trade of Edwards to the New York Jets. Edwards, who didn't catch a pass the entire game, took out his frustration on a man half his size in the form of the owner of a Cleveland night club. It not only got Edwards a ticket out of Cleveland but it also brought on the wrath of LeBron James as it turns out that the man in question was a close friend of the King.

Hearing James call out Edwards during an interview would have easily won as season highlight until the Steelers victory snuck up and bit everyone on the butt.

The Edwards trade brought the Browns Jason Trusnik, a 4th year player from Nordonia High School and Ohio Northern, wide receiver Chansi Stuckey, and two draft picks.

Trusnik and Stuckey were and remain mostly role players but there would be no criticizing this trade.

It was the quintessential definition of addition by subtraction.

However, it also served as the beginning of a deep schism inside of Berea that would eventually lead to the firing of Kokinis by Mangini Lerner. Kokinis wasn't involved in any aspect of the Edwards trade, an odd situation considering he supposedly had the final authority over the roster. It served as the beginning of the end of another relationship in Mangini's life.

The Browns got their first victory of the season the next week against the team that served as their last victim as well, the Buffalo Bills. It was a mess of a game that was won on a Billy Cundiff 18-yard field goal after Bills' returner Roscoe Parrish tried to field a Dave Zastudil punt with 3 minutes left in the game. Blake Costanzo jumped on the ball and the Browns milked the clock down to the last few seconds before the Cundiff kick

Mangini acted as if his team had won the Super Bowl instead of an inartistic mess of a game against one of the league's doormats. Still, it ensured the Browns would not go 0-16. And erson again had drawn the start on the strength of his game against Cincinnati and Mangini's desire to avoid paying Quinn any sort of bonus.

Harrison was back in his usual role of change of pace back while Lewis had 31 carries for 117 yards.

Anderson, on the other hand, was awful.

He completed 2 passes in 17 attempts for 23 yards and 1 interception.

Still it was enough to earn him a start the following week, mainly because Quinn's ability to reach his bonus was still in question.

Quinn meanwhile was dangling and word leaked out that he supposedly had his house up for sale. Actually he did, deciding that he didn't need something approaching 4,000 square feet in which to wander around after practice. He settled on a condo closer to Berea.

The Browns' success was short lived as they were spanked by the Steelers a week later, 27-14. It wasn't quite the blowout that the previous season closer had been, but it also wasn't nearly as close as the final score would indicate.

Ben Roethlisberger had his way with the secondary, throwing for 417 yards and 2 touchdowns.

Cribbs helped keep the game close by returning a kickoff 98 yards for a touchdown.

He was also the leading rusher with 45 yards on 6 carries.

Anderson again was awful. He completed only 9 of 24 passes for 122 yards, fumbled twice and was intercepted once.

It would earn him a start the following week.

D'Qwell Jackson would see his season end with a shoulder injury.

The Browns followed up one miserable performance with another, getting drilled the following week by Green Bay 31-3. The Packers smartly kicked away from Cribbs all game and Aaron Rodgers found his game.

During garbage time, Mangini again refused to go to Quinn even though Anderson was finding even more ways to look awful.

On the game he was 12-29 for 99 yards and 1 interception.

It was now halfway through the season and the team had shown no progress over 2008. It became clear to me then that Mangini and his staff were in over their heads.

Despite all his talk about the process he was following, it was now clear that the team was worse than a year before and for no apparent reason.