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. Gary Benz has opted for somewhere between the two, and today, wraps up an expansive retrospective on the '09 Browns season that we've been running over the course of this past week. In today's final installment, Gary focuses on the improbable second half of the season, where the team went from a league doormat to a squad that won their final four games and saved the job of coach Eric Mangini.

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 VII. This is The Part Where The Second Half Begins.

The myth that this team had to get worse to get better is just that. It was bad before Eric

Mangini arrived and while it was expected that the steps forward would be small and infrequent there was no reason to think that there was still steps backward it could take. There were. The team was averaging 4 less points than the year before (a year in which it didn't score an offensive touchdown in its last 7 games) and was averaging 25 yards less on offense. Defensively, it was now giving up 4 more points and almost 50 more yards per game.

The players didn't seem particularly pleased with the state of things, either. Jamal Lewis, one of the team's captains, came out publicly and questioned almost everything about what Mangini was doing. He claimed the players were often kept in the dark and were essentially be treated like crops on a farm. The next day the players in the locker room applauded him.

Randy Lerner, ever the silent one, responded to all the drama not to the media but to a random emailer, telling him that he remained open to new and fresh ideas and thinking on how to make the team better. He would then take that bit of populism further by meeting with the fans' self-appointed leader, Dawg Pound Mike, who was starting a movement to have fans boycott the opening series of the Browns' next game.

Lerner and DPM had a "great conversation" according to DPM, which in this context probably meant that DPM got to plead his case for lower beer prices in the stadium. Fortunately for Lerner the bye week got in the way and about the only one still interested in any sort of protest when the next game rolled around was, you guessed it, Dawg Pound Mike.

The Browns did use their bye week to accomplish two things. First, Derek Anderson was banished to the bench permanently. Demonstrating that even he has a gag reflex, Mangini had finally seen enough of Anderson to realize that there was no question to which he was the answer. It helped, too, that it would now be statistically impossible for Brady Quinn to earn any sort of bonus.

Second, Lerner demonstrated he too had a gag reflex and fired George Kokinis, saying that the team was now in search of a serious, credible leader. That statement inflamed Kokinis and his lawyers because it implied that Kokinis wasn't doing his job. He's now suing the Browns for the value of his remaining contract and the case is in mandatory arbitration before the league office. That statement also should have inflamed Mangini who thought that by getting Kokinis out of the way he would be that serious, credible leader. Outwardly it didn't, but the statement resonated with the fans. It would prove to be a turning point in more ways than one.

Following the Kokinis fallout Lerner officially brought Bernie Kosar back into the fold in an undetermined role as a consultant. Mangini outwardly welcomed another set of eyes. Inwardly, he had to be seething. Kosar, with virtually no experience, would now have just as direct of a pipeline to Lerner as Mangini. It had to sting.

Meanwhile, early word was that Lerner had former Seattle Seahawks head coach Mike Holmgren in his sights to take on the role of football czar, a position pioneered, sort of, by Bill Parcells in Miami. The early word proved correct.

With the season now a complete and utter disaster, Mangini became even more entrenched. He talked repeatedly about his "process" but never once bothered to explain it. With more an more media members calling for his ouster, Mangini took to a series of interviews with the networks that were designed to improve his public profile. It didn't work. Mangini used the forums to again reiterate that all this was a process but otherwise allowed no further insight into his thinking. He would have been the textbook example of how not to handle a crisis but that award went to Mark Steinberg at IMG a few weeks later in the midst of Tiger Wood's public meltdown.

But there was a second half of the season to play and with it came the re-birth of Quinn. In one of the season's most unintentionally funny moments, Mangini explained that Quinn had improved dramatically by watching each week and earned the start. What really improved was the economics of Quinn's contract. By inserting him now, the Browns could be assured of not having to pay Quinn what amounted to an extra $11 million in the form of a performance bonus and an increased 2010 salary. Of course, Anderson was the league's worst quarterback by a country mile but that apparently had nothing to do with Mangini's decision, either.

The second half of the season didn't start any better than the first half ended, or than the first half began for that matter. The Browns were shut out by the Ravens 16-0 on national television on Monday night. The Ravens proved themselves to be a merely average team and yet were able to keep the Browns from ever sniffing the end zone. Quinn was very Anderson-like, going 13-31 for 99 yards and 2 interceptions. In other words, for the Browns, it was a typical day at the office.

A few days later, Lerner let it be known, again through email, that he saw himself sticking with

Mangini into 2010 despite the wreckage. Lerner would later acknowledge, however, that the decision would ultimately rest with the new but yet unnamed football czar.

Part VIII. This is the Part Where the Worm Begins to Turn, Sort Of.

The first real sign that there indeed was any life in this team came the following week in an entertaining loss to the Detoirt Lions, 38-37. It was a game in which the Browns blew an early 21 point lead, then a 3-point lead and finally a 6-point lead with no time remaining. It also was the game that the Lions' new quarterback, Mathew Stafford had been waiting for.

For the game, Stafford had 5 touchdown passes against one of the worst defenses in the league. The Lions scored the game winner in a furious rally in the last 2 minutes. With 8 seconds remaining and the ball on the Cleveland 32-yard line, Stafford was forced to scramble and unleash a Hail Mary to the end zone. It was intercepted by Brodney Pool but Hank Poteat was flagged for interference as the clock expired, giving the Lions one final play.

Stafford was hurt on the play and didn't look to be able to continue. But Mangini called time out, giving Stafford just enough time to recover for one final play. Predictably he found Brandon Pettigrew in the end zone for the game winner.

In the pantheon that is this Browns' season, the loss represented the first visible sign of progress. The offense at least was able to move the ball repeatedly, albeit against what amounts to their NFC twin.

Mangini used the following week's press conference to unleash his one true moment of candor. He used it judiciously, accusing Lions coach Jim Schwartz (you remember him, he's the guy that Pioli wanted Cleveland to consider) of having his players essentially fake injuries to keep the Browns' no-huddle offense at bay. It represented another former colleague of Mangini's being thrown on an ever more crowded road, just waiting for the on-coming bus. Mangini would later claim that his comments were misinterpreted but took the blame for that occurring in the first place.

The Browns' resurgence wasn't immediate. First there would be another loss to the Bengals, this time 16-7. It wasn't the offensive outpouring of a week before, but then again the Bengals don't use the Lions' defense. The story of that game though was more about the Bengals, who, despite surging to the top of the defense, looked like a pretty spotty team in the process. The Browns were now 1-10. There's your progress.

Things really didn't get better the following week as the Browns dropped a 30-23 game to the San Diego Chargers. The score was closer than the game as the Browns scored late when the game was out of reach and time was expiring. It was a perfect trap game for the Chargers but they managed to keep their season intact by essentially doing just enough to beat the hapless Browns.

The Browns now stood at 1-11 but none of that would end up mattering as the following Thursday the Browns got perhaps the biggest monkey off their back in the form of the Steelers. To the dropped jaws and stunned looks of the thousands that watched, the Browns beat the Steelers 13-6, thoroughly dominating the reigning Super Bowl champs in the process. It was the Steelers' fifth straight loss and seriously damaged any chance they had to get back to the playoffs.

It was a night worth celebrating, a night beleaguered Browns fans deserved. It also was a night that belonged to Cribbs. He set up one score with a 54-yard punt return and was nearly unstoppable out of the wildcat formation. He had 8 carries for 87 yards.

For Mangini's dwindling base of supporters, the victory represented justification that the "process" was working. Never mind the damage inflicted over the previous 12 weeks, apparently this one victory was enough to forgive all sins. Statistically, however, the Browns remained at the bottom of the league on both sides of the ball in every meaningful statistic.

The Browns made it two straight victories the following week, beating fellow league doormat Kansas City, 41-34. They did it in record breaking fashion. Cribbs notched two more kick returns for touchdown, giving him 8 for his career and making him the NFL career leader in that category. Jerome Harrison, mostly forgotten since the first Cincinnati game, came out of nowhere to set the Browns' single game rushing record. On the day he had 286 yards on 34 carries, shattering Jim Brown's previous mark of 237 yards. Still the Browns needed the two Cribbs returns and had to survive a late scare by the Chiefs to get the victory.

If there was any real progress to measure in the victory, it was this. The Browns finally were developing an offensive identity. The Browns had quietly become a no-huddle, run first offense. Quinn was being asked to manage the game and the offensive line and with right tackle John St. Clair finally heading to the bench in favor of anyone else, the offense was finding a sustainable rhythm.

But even better news was delivered a few days later when Lerner finally delivered on his promise to find a serious, credible leader. Mike Holmgren was hired as the Browns' new president and given essentially free reign to remake the franchise in any way he saw fit. It was a watershed moment for Lerner, a move that showed that eventually he could get something right. He finally had put the hands of his franchise into someone with a successful track record; someone with league-wide respect and credibility. It was a decision that is likely to have more far reaching ramifications than a modest two-game win streak.

The Holmgren hiring represented something of a reprieve for the players as they now knew that their fates weren't solely in the hands of Mangini any longer. For a player like Cribbs, for example, it gave him someone knew to plead his case to for a new contract. Reportedly, in one of Holmgren's first official acts, he gave the all clear for the club to re-do Cribbs' contract, something Mangini never quite found the time for despite all the implied promises.

Buoyed by the sudden goodwill floating around Berea, the Browns made it three straight the following week, beating another fellow doormat, this time the Oakland Raiders, 23-9. Whatever direction the Browns might be on, it's clear they aren't heading the same way as the Raiders. Indeed, the Raiders looked like the Browns of 2008, committing one mistake after another on their way to the loss. The Browns looked positively disciplined by comparison, which is one of the few promises Mangini had been able to deliver on all season.

But the win also had the specter of Holmgren's hiring hanging over it and what it all would mean for Mangini. In his first press conference as Browns' president, Holmgren promised only to evaluate Mangini in the context of the entire season. Pointedly, he made no commitment to Mangini's future. More pointedly, Holmgren related the story of his first season in Seattle and how it was a mistake not to get all of his own people in place that first year. If you were into reading tea leaves, this didn't bode well for Mangini.

But Mangini's fate would have to wait until season's end. There was still the matter of that last game of the season in front of a half full stadium sitting frigid in the whipping wind for God knows what reason.

Part IX. This is the Part Where the Browns Get A Simple Twist of Fate

The Browns played Jacksonville in the last game of the season in absolutely frigid conditions. Although the Jaguars hadn't been mathematically eliminated from the playoffs, their only chance hinged on them beating the Browns and nearly everyone else in the league losing.

The Jaguars played like they were in a hurry to head back to Jacksonville, which, by the way, wasn't much warmer because of a late season cold spell, while the Browns played like kids at recess. They also proved, just as they had earlier in the season, that it really didn't matter who quarterbacked this team as long as the running game worked.

Jerome Harrison had his third-straight 100+ yard rushing game and Josh Cribbs had a nifty 14-yard touchdown run out of the wildcat formation. Still, it was hard to know what to make of what was now a 4-game winning streak.

It was the first time the newly reconstituted Browns had achieved that milestone, but it came against teams that didn't make the playoffs. The run game was now as formidable as any in the league but where had it been the previous 12 games? It was a game of puzzles, in other words, that weren't likely to get solved until Mike Holmgren officially took over as club president.

Holmgren's tenure officially began the day after the Jacksonville game, though he had been working a bit behind the scenes. He got off to a great start by conducting the season's most engaging news conference. He carefully explained his philosophies, hinted that Eric Mangini might not be retained, but allowed himself the time necessary to make the right decisions.

Over the next few days, Holmgren and Mangini held a series of meetings to discuss his future.

Most didn't think it would end well. Mangini wasn't a Holmgren kind of guy philosophically and operationally. Holmgren likes his offense to be of the West Coast variety with less downfield passing and more controlled throws designed to keep the ball moving. He likes his defense to be of the 4-3 variety where all the burden doesn't fall on the linebackers to make it go. And while Holmgren has the necessary paranoia that every NFL executive has, but he's far less guarded with the media and never gives anyone the sense that he thinks he's working on nuclear fission.

After those few days, Mangini and his staff emerged with their jobs in tact. Holmgren didn't bother to explain it in any great detail to the media, but the speculation remained that it was a decision of convenience. With a potentially crippling labor war shaping up with the Players Association, now didn't necessarily represent the time to keep still another ex-coach on the payroll. It also gave Holmgren the chance to personally view and assess Mangini for another year. If Mangini could continue the progress, great. If he couldn't, Holmgren could step in the following season as the coach without it looking like the Browns were resetting the pin deck.

Overshadowing the Mangini decision, though, was still Josh Cribbs. While the Browns did begin trying to re-work his contract, they weren't moving nearly fast enough for his dime-store agents who then took things public and, in the process, made their client look greedy.

Few if any fans questioned whether Cribbs should get more money. But most understood that it wasn't as if another game was pending at the moment and, hey, didn't Holmgren have other more pressing matters on his agenda, such as hiring a general manager?

Besides, no one took Cribbs' statement that he probably played his last game in Cleveland seriously. Cribbs was still under contract with the Browns for the next three years and while no player probably is untouchable, Cribbs comes the closest. In other words, fans mostly yawned at the news.

Also overshadowing the Mangini decision was the impeding hire of Philadelphia Eagles general manager Tom Heckert, Jr. as the Browns' new general manager. But all of that is getting ahead of myself at the moment. That's really the start of the 2010 season.

But looking back and surveying all of the wreckage and some of the triumphs, what stands out

most is how much a toll this season really took on the fans. Mangini's hiring wasn't greeted with parades, but most were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Then all he did was take them on a ride that would plum the depths of this franchise further before getting it back up to some sort of steady state. It was a ride that will be hard to forget.

The fans will always be in it for the long haul, but the reality is that the fan base of this franchise is dwindling, something that will become more pronounced in the seasons to come. The end of the old Browns, coming as it did in the mid 1990s wasn't so great. Then there was the break and then what amounts to a 10-year death march. That's nearly a generation of futility and, with it, a generation of lost fans.

The Browns can, of course, get it all back. The Holmgren hiring was so important because at its core that's Holmgren's charge. And while he'll have plenty of company in his front office, someone who will only observe from afar will be Randy Lerner. You just get the sense that with his hiring of Holmgren, Lerner can focus on what really interests him: English Premier League soccer.

And if this all works out just as Lerner sees it in his mind's eye, then the fans will be happy, and next year's season in review on this site can be about half as long with twice as much good news, and I'll be happy.