If the NFL's labor situation works out like it should, the players will go on strike at the end of next season just as the Cleveland Browns are poised to make a legitimate run at the playoffs in 2011.

It will work that way because that's the kind of curse this franchise has been more or less operating under since it returned. It also will work out that way for the same reason that Clemenza felt a war between the families was necessary every 5 years or so-it gets rid of all the bad blood.

The NFL Players Association and the NFL Management Council are on a collision course at the moment, a semi-high stakes game of chicken as they both run toward the edge of a cliff that is still just a spec in the distance. But each day the representatives of each, DeMaurice Smith for the union and Roger Goodell for the owners, posture and preen draws them one step closer to mutual self-destruction.

Not to get all dramatic about this, but the NFL and its union once again threaten to kill the goose laying their golden eggs. Sure, as Goodell said in his "State of the NFL" address before Sunday's Super Bowl, an agreement will eventually come. But it's more than just a matter of "when." It's also a matter of how much blood will be spilled getting there.

The last time these two parties were at odds this early in the process was, not coincidentally, the last time there was a strike. In 1987, the owners and players went to war over free agency and the right size piece the players would get of the owners' economic pie. A few games into the season the union decided to strike and the owners responded by essentially hiring replacement players. The union had no credible back up plan and the strike was a colossal

disaster.

That 1987 strike wasn't without its collateral damage on the owners, however. They may have broken the union's spirit well enough, but their credibility took a huge hit. The one positive aspect out of it, however, was that the parties learned a lesson and an unprecedented level of peace has followed since. Clemenza was right.

The last collective bargaining agreement these parties signed was in 2006. As you may recall, the issues then were fairly contentious and a strike seemed to be looming but then Commission Paul Tagliabue strong-armed the owners into making a deal they have since regretted. In large part, Tagliabue's "retirement" was accelerated because of the animosity among the owners toward him for forcing on them a deal that they believe has hurt them dramatically ever since.

This is where personalities enter into the fray. Goodell was hired, in large measure, to take a much stronger stand with the union this time around. He's saying all the right things at the moment but don't think for one moment that he is mistaken about his charge. And the main charge is to get back some of the revenue that Tagliabue gave away.

On the union's side of things, they've been sitting fat and happy with that 2006 contract and can't conceive of any give backs. Gene Upshaw, who was leading the union at the time, was a bit of a hero though he quickly thereafter faced a growing insurrection from older members of the union and retirees about what they perceive as indifference to their issues. Although the parties involved denied it, there was a move to oust him as well but Upshaw succumbed to cancer before the movement was fully realized.

Enter Smith, the Washington D.C. lawyer who surprisingly won the runoff election last year to lead the union in this upcoming fight. Smith, showing he's no slouch at the rhetoric game, told the assembled media at his version of the "State of the NFL" address this past weekend that on a scale of 1 to 10, it's a 14 that his members will get locked out by management.

It's early, I suppose, so you have to take this kind of goofy saber rattling with a grain of salt. But as hard as the owners claim they are working on the issues, it still comes down to their demand to shrink the size of the union's pie. Whatever ancillary issues are clattering around are just noise, and that includes any talk by the union that if 2010 is an uncapped year it will never again

agree to a salary cap.

The overlay to all of this is the tough economic conditions. It would certainly have helped the owners cause had these negotiations started last year but no one anticipates a miraculous recovery in the economy any time soon so the issues will still be mostly ripe when they get around to talking in earnest.

If forced to make a prediction at the moment, it would be that there will be some sort of work stoppage in the NFL before the start of the 2011 season and it most likely will take the form of a lockout. The union is a little smarter than they were in 1987 and the owners won't risk a midseason disruption in the form of a strike. A lockout is preemptive.

It may be that a lockout will be necessary but another prediction I'll make at the moment is that when it's all over there will be sufficient handwringing on both sides about how unnecessary all of it was. The union will accede, to a point, on the owners' economic demands to redefine the applicable revenue pool downward while the owners will acquiesce to collateral issues like pensions, health care and the like.

The arc of emotions for the fan start with anxiety and end with relief. In between is a healthy amount of sympathy, empathy, anger and confusion. For the most part though fans can't seem to understand how millionaires and billionaires can't easily and peacefully figure out how to divide such riches.

That's the biggest red herring in all of this. The money involved is just a matter of scale. At its core, though, are the same sorts of issues that employers and employees of all stripes fight over all the time. No matter your particular economic situation in life, you still want to feel like you've been dealt with fairly by your employer and that goes for professional athletes.

That being said, my patience and tolerance for this kind of distraction in professional sports grows thinner as the years roll by. The billions involved complicate the issues but ultimately what the sides are fighting about is how to best entertain the millions that follow them. They hardly provide a vital service. If professional sports were eliminated from the planet tomorrow, in a few short weeks almost everyone would find something else to do.

That really should be the wake up call for both Smith and Goodell. Their own livelihoods are made possible by the ridiculous lengths fans will go to support their ventures. They can continue to position themselves to look as good as possible in front of their own constituencies, but this isn't 1958 anymore. The distractions vying for everyone's times are 100-fold more than they were then. Keep pushing the fan base around long enough and eventually it will stop pushing back, mostly because it will have long since lost interest.