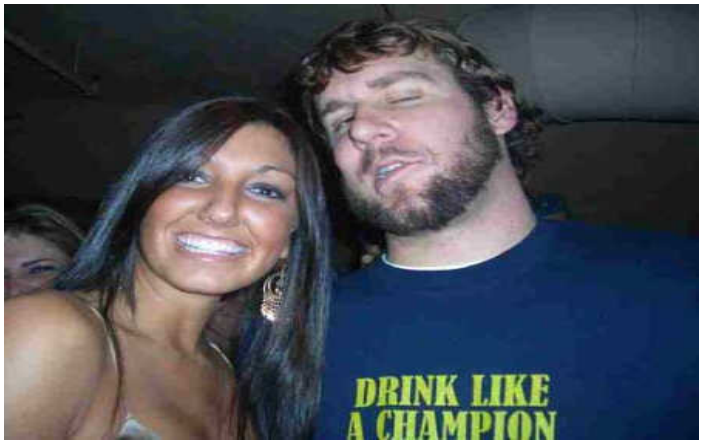

Owning a professional football team would be great if it didn't come with the players. But alas it does and thus far too often owning a team can be far more trouble than it's worth.

If you're Randy Lerner, for example, and you inherit the Cleveland Browns when all you really wanted was a pile of money instead you have to know that feeling. Lerner was ill-equipped to do so when he first took over as owner and only recently has become a little more adept at it.

In the interim he's probably woken up in the middle of the night screaming dozens of times. He's squandered millions on bad decisions of his own making that involved placing trust in people he hardly knew. As often happens that trust ended up being misplaced. Lerner's latest decisions hold more promise than any of those previously made and as a result he's probably getting comfortable in the notion that he now can do what he's seemingly always wanted to do, go back to just being a fan. When he reaches that spot, the nightmares should end.

In the last several years it couldn't have been much fun being Mike Brown, the owner of the Cincinnati Bengals. Though he hired himself a decent head coach in Marvin Lewis he has always held the purse strings rather tight, keeping the team well under the salary cap each and every season.

All this did was increase the pressure on himself and Lewis to take chances on players with a good upside but were otherwise of questionable character. Those kind always come cheaper. As it so often happens, players with questionable character, like anyone else with questionable character, eventually sink to their own depths. Not surprisingly, the Bengals became a league joke as their public relations team seemingly spent more time minimizing still another arrest of another player than talking about the team's next game.

So many Bengals players have had arrests in the last several seasons that the stripes on the uniform pants look like foreshadowing. You could blame Lewis and there's nothing wrong with that. He supported bringing in that gang. You can also blame Brown and there's nothing wrong with that, either. Tone starts from the top.

But the bigger issue, I think, is that these are supposed to be professional football players and adults. They acted like neither and that's on them.

Which brings us around to where this column was ultimately going in the first place, the Pittsburgh Steelers. Sitting in Cleveland we've had a unique perspective of the Steelers over the last 10 years and usually that involves looking up at a scoreboard that reads Pittsburgh 7, Cleveland 0 with 10:15 left in the first quarter and knowing that the deficit is too much to overcome.

You don't have to be a diehard Browns fan to hate the Steelers, but it helps. Nonetheless, they are the kind of rival about whom you tend to have begrudging respect. They've had good, consistent ownership. They've hired well. They've drafted well. In fact, they seemed to have done most things well at exactly the same time Cleveland has done everything poorly.

While any successful team will have a certain amount of arrogance about it, you never much got the feeling that the Steelers were cocky. Mostly they were workmanlike and professional. The Rooneys seemed to escape most of the same hassles of ownership that has gotten to everyone else.

Not anymore. Because most everything in life is cyclical, the Rooneys are finally are feeling the heat. Santonio Holmes, the former Buckeye, has performed well on the field and questionably off of it. Each time he scrambles to make a problem go away just reminds everyone that often times the best use of a multi-million dollar salary is to buy yourself a little more justice than the guy funding that salary can afford for himself.

There also have been a few problems with Jeff Reed, their kicker. Why a kicker would get himself in trouble is anyone's guess but when the wheels fall off they apparently all fall off.

Reed was arrested twice in 2009, one for beating up a towel dispenser at a Sheetz gas station and another time for public intoxication.

Linebacker James Harrison had his own brush with the law as the result of a domestic violence arrest in 2008. He received anger management counseling which seems a little counterintuitive since he is, after all, a linebacker. But it helped keep the incident under the rug where it belonged and helped frame the rather existential question that if a woman gets hit but doesn't press charges, did she really get hit at all?

But these three appear to be mere amateurs in the bad decision department. For the true pro you have to turn to Ben Roethlisberger. Sure he's tortured the Browns and a host of other teams in a wildly successful career to date that's included two Super Bows. But Roethlisberger at the moment is staring down the business end of an investigation in Georgia over an alleged sexual assault of a 20-year old college student. That investigation just gets lopped onto the other sexual assault allegation against Roethlisberger that's currently pending in a civil court in Las Vegas.

At this point Roethlisberger hasn't officially been charged with a crime. And it's a long way from being charged and being convicted. If history teaches us anything (see Holmes, Reed, Harrison, for example) there are any number of ways to avoid being found guilty of anything particularly serious. So maybe this circumstance goes away without Roethlisberger being labeled a felon.

But the broader point should not be lost. Roethlisberger is a mess. Without putting too fine a point on it, let's just say that he often appears to be too familiar with the slings and arrows of alcohol intake and it's not just impairing his judgment and it's not just endangering his career. It's endangering others as well.

As a result, he's now putting others in harms way. That, I think, is where this line has to get drawn. If Roethlisberger wants to sit in his house and Georgia and drink himself silly with no one else around, that's his business. But when he takes his drunken show on the road, trouble tends to follow.

The Steelers certainly know they have a problem on their hands. At the moment they just don't

know the extent. But they're concerned enough to keep Roethlisberger away from their football complex for the time being. Yes, he's that big of a distraction.

In time, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell will punish Roethlisberger. Goodell will probably suspend him for a game or two and may force him into some kind of treatment program. That's all just the short-term fallout. For the Steelers, the fact that their team is fraying at the edges and that it's their most valuable player handling the scissors signals a far bigger and longer term problem.

As much as Browns fans (and probably Ravens and Bengals fans as well) would like to hear it, the Steelers aren't going to throw Roethlisberger overboard. That could change of course if Roethlisberger ultimately is charged and convicted in Georgia. But for the time being, this is a problem that the Rooney family just has to manage. It's a headache they hardly needed but it comes with the territory and now they probably know what the rest of the owners feel like on a regular basis.

The point all this proves, though, is that no team is immune, not even the fabled Steelers and their fabled Steelers way, from the problems created when immature and selfish athletes and too much money mix. Roethlisberger is both a cautionary tale and a marker for the problem and has put at the forefront an all together not existential question: If a team can't keep both its kicker and its quarterback in line, what chance does it really have with the rest of the players?