At the moment, the most important thing to know about Joe Haden, whom the Cleveland Browns drafted with the 7th pick in this year's NFL draft, is not his time in the 40-yard dash at the combine or how much man-love Tim Tebow might have for him. Nope. The most important thing to know about Haden is that when summer rolls around he won't be in training camp on time. In a world of uncertainty, this is as close to a lock cinch bet as you'll ever find.

From there a predictable pattern will follow.

When training camp does open and Haden still isn't signed, you'll then read the usual quotes from the usual suspects. As the days drag on head coach Eric Mangini will get that hang dog expression of his and say something about how he can only coach the players that are there. Haden's agent, following the script prepared at agent camp, will retort about how his client is anxious to get into camp as quickly as possible and meanwhile he's working out on his own in Arizona or maybe Florida or maybe a local high school.

Browns president Mike Holmgren eventually will tire of the question about when Haden sill sign and will snap the neck of the next reporter that asks. The smart money is on Tony Grossi.

Somewhere around the second preseason game, maybe the third, the whole thing will get resolved.

That means of course another round of the usual quotes by the usual suspects.

Haden will say how he's just glad this thing is over and he can't wait to get on the practice field. His agent will talk about how difficult of a negotiation it was but in the end the parties compromised so that Haden could get on the field and show why the Browns took him with the 7th pick. The agent might even throw a few bon mots at whoever is negotiating the contract for the Browns, praising his or her professionalism.

Then either Holmgren or general manager Tom Heckert or both will talk about how they are glad this is behind them and how they hope that the league and the players union can find a solution to all of this at the bargaining table come season's end.

I know all this as surely that I know that it will be a scenario that will be played out simultaneously in no less than 20 other NFL cities come July because that's how the NFL likes to operate.

Here's another thing I also know, the salary that Haden will get when that holdout eventually ends: $38.5 million over 5 years with $24 million of it guaranteed. In fact, I'm so sure about this that I'd be glad to bet both Haden and his agent on this. If he signs for anything within 5% of the above figures, then they pay me $100,000 for each day Hayden holds out. If they get more than 5% than this, I'll give him my next 10 paychecks from The Cleveland Fan.

It's not that I have any particular insider knowledge here. It's just that I already know what last year's 6th pick, Andre Smith, signed for and that's the best marker for what this year's 7th pick will sign for. It always has been.

This is hardly science. If you go over the NFL's salary figures for the first round over the last

several years, you'll find a pretty consistent pattern. The contract of the player drafted one pick before you in the previous year more or less becomes your contract, give or take a few million dollars either way. That's why Haden's contract will look like Smith's, just like Smith's contract looked like Glenn Dorsey's, with a slight kicker to adjust for inflation (as if that was a problem in 2009).

Every once in awhile the pattern doesn't quite hold because quarterbacks drafted early tend to command a premium as if they were the first pick anyway. In 2008 Matt Ryan was drafted third and signed for 6 years, $72 million with $34 million guaranteed. This was higher than either of the two picks before him, one of which was Jake Long, the offensive tackle taken first. Long may get the bragging rights on draft position, but not on salary.

Thus, all you do is adjust for the quarterbacks and you're back in business. Last year, Matt Stafford was the top pick and signed for 6 years and $72 million, just like Ryan, but this time with $41.7 million guaranteed. With Sam Bradford this year's number one pick, his contract with St. Louis is likely to be eerily similar in terms of salary and length to Stafford's but with about $49 million guaranteed. Count on it. His agent is.

The system isn't foolproof but it is consistent enough to the point that there shouldn't be any holdouts in any year. But NFL owners like to delude themselves into thinking that they're really going to hold the line this year and agents like to delude themselves that this is the year they can break a nearly unbreakable mold. Thus a standoff of sorts occurs until eventually someone blinks. Then, let the slotting begins in earnest.

What makes all this interesting if not downright humorous is the fact that one of the key issues keeping the union and the owners apart at the moment is the implementation of a NBA-like rookie salary schedule. Owners want one because they say it will give them more money to allocate to veterans. The union doesn't want one because they're still stuck in the notion that higher rookie salaries beget higher veteran salaries.

They're both full of crap and what's more they both know it.

If the owners wanted to allocate more money to veterans, then why were so many teams millions below the salary cap in the last several years? Rather than cut a veteran whom they

perceive as making too much in favor of an undrafted free agent making the minimum, why not just use a little more of that unused cap space? Wouldn't that make the team better?

If the union on the other hand really thinks that higher rookie salaries are raising veteran salaries, then they need to get past Marvin Milleresque economic theory and start facing reality. The players that are squeezed time and again when an unproven player like Bradford is given a fortune up front is the long-term veteran with that supposedly raised salary. It's nice when their veteran status got them that higher salary but not so nice when it ends up costing them their job.

If you're looking for a dog to back in this fight, go with the owners. Irrespective of the disingenuous nature of their argument, lower operating costs tend to be to the benefit, if only slightly, of the fans. Moreover, getting every player into camp on time is the best way to ensure that the team you thought you were investing in when you bought your season tickets after the draft was conducted is the team you're getting by the time that first regular season game actually is played.

The hidden issue in all this are the agents that really control the heart and mind of the union. It's the agents more than anyone else that have the most vested interest in big rookie contracts because of the commissions they generate. Introduce a rookie salary schedule and the agent gets squeezed twice. The commission on his first round pick client goes down if not completely eliminated and the veteran client that doesn't get cut as a result doesn't in turn generate a potentially new commission when the agent has to negotiate a contract for him with a new team.

If the union wasn't so beholden to the agents, this issue would probably be solved and rather quickly at that. Of course when it comes to the Browns, holdouts by rookies have hardly been their most pressing problem. Given their drafting history, too often it's been to their advantage.