If you want to know how to simultaneously raise and then lower expectations, just follow the lead of Cleveland Browns president Mike Holmgren.

Intimating that Colt McCoy was the second best quarterback in this year's college draft, Holmgren talked about how fortuitous it was the McCoy fell into the team's lap in the third round. Then Holmgren proceeded to tamp down any expectations about McCoy for the upcoming season by saying rather strongly that McCoy's assignment this year is to watch and learn.

It's nice to have adults finally running the franchise.

Holmgren as much as anyone knows the team he oversees isn't a Super Bowl contender at the moment. The running game still isn't what he wants to see even taking into account Jerome Harrison's 4-game breakout at the end of last season. The offensive line is decent, perhaps the strength of the team at the moment, but that simply isn't enough reason to unnecessarily start a rookie, particularly when your receiving corps is among the worst in the league.

With that kind of mixed bag and a couple of serviceable quarterbacks on the roster to help the

team get through the season anyway Holmgren was merely reflecting reality in his statement, calmly, professionally.

Of course this is April and those kinds of things are easy to say. There are a lot of turns of the globe between then and now and probably a billion bumps and bruises to be administered, meaning all that can change for reasons no one wants to contemplate.

The perfect scenario for the Browns is that Jake Delhomme remains healthy all season but that isn't likely. The Browns do have a history and it suggests that not only will Delhomme get hurt but so too will Seneca Wallace when he backs him up.

Thus it isn't all that unlikely actually that McCoy sees action eventually this season. But for now it's good to have a high-profile quarterback on the roster almost completely unburdened by high expectations. It's the right way to nurture a career.

Fans in other cities have been somewhat spoiled in recent years as rookies have come in and played decently from the start. But that scenario usually involves a good team and a coaching staff that understands how to skinny down the playbook so that the rookie isn't required to win the game, just not lose it.

Brady Quinn, the latest deposed high-profile quarterback of the Browns never really got that kind of opportunity in Cleveland. There's enough blame to go around. Quinn shouldn't have foolishly held out. Derek Anderson became a one-year wonder. Phil Savage dithered on how to handle the situation. Injuries mounted. A new staff came in ill-equipped in the art of preparing a quarterback for the season.

Nonetheless it all amounts to the simple fact that another Browns can't-miss prospect missed, which is what eventually led the Browns to McCoy.

The other object lesson, of course, is Tim Couch, who presents a near perfect road map to the destination best to avoid. Playing behind an offensive line that would have made Dan Marino jittery, Couch was repeatedly beaten like an egg in a blender. He suffered injuries from which

he never fully recovered and whatever promise he may have once held was permanently extinguished.

Holmgren understands full well the lessons of these two and sees it as his mission to avoid that with McCoy. This time it should be a lot easier.

The real trick in Holmgren's ability to effectively manage McCoy's career will be Holmgren's relationship with head coach Eric Mangini. For now, Mangini is Holmgren's coach. But even Mangini knows that it's a shaky existence given the events of last season.

Too often head coaches in football and managers in baseball are prone to short term decisions when they only see their careers in the short term. When you feel like your own career is hanging in the balance the tendency is to try and win now, irrespective of the cost down the road.

Thus Holmgren's task is to build confidence not only for his quarterback-in-waiting but his dangling head coach so that this kind of scenario doesn't develop. Mangini knows that the most popular player on the roster is the back-up quarterback and when things get tough and his relationship with the fans worsens it would be easy to pander by inserting McCoy. But if Mangini knows he's not dangling himself then he'll have no reason to pander.

There's no guarantee that any of this works out but you have to like the odds given the person running the show.

And assuming it all goes according to plan, that McCoy fell to the Browns in the 3rd round will end up being the story of this draft a few years from now. McCoy has an “it” factor that should serve him well in the NFL. You can look at the stats and discount them if you want because but for a handful of games among his 40+ starts, the Texas Longhorns were going to win those games even if Amos McCoy was starting at quarterback.

But that shouldn't diminish McCoy's accomplishments. Nor should the fact that he fell into the third round suggest that NFL-types aren't sold on his abilities. NFL executives are prone to

group think and once a quarterback or any other high profile player starts to fall these same executives start questioning their own research thinking that maybe someone knows something they don't.

Perhaps feeding the group think is the simple fact that this just completed draft has such an uncertain labor situation as its overhang. Simply put, players in trenches are paid less than players at the so-called skill positions. The odd trajectory of this draft may be as much a factor of teams seeing a need to preserve cash as it was teams seeing the need to fill in critical spots on their offensive and defensive lines and defensive backfields.

Holmgren did talk about making a push to get the first pick in the draft in order to draft Sam Bradford. I'm not really sure if that means Holmgren is more worried about the quarterbacks he has on the roster or more impressed with Bradford's potential. It's probably some of both.

Yet I suspect that if Holmgren really wanted Bradford on this roster he would have found a way to make that trade. The only conclusion then that I can really draw about this aborted attempt was that getting Bradford on this roster wasn't as important as filling in the gaping holes in the secondary.

Whether it actually plays out that way will always be a question in the back of fans' minds, but it's hard to second-guess Holmgren at the moment. The most enduring image of the team on the field last season is of its defensive backs constantly chasing after opponents that had just blown past them. It may have only seemed like every game featured at least one long pass or run by an opponent, mostly because it did.

Concentrating the early part of the draft, and the somewhat limited movement in free agency, in the defensive backfield was the biggest no-brainer since the NFL schedule makers wisely decided that the Browns don't need to be featured on any of its Thursday, Sunday night or Monday night games. It's good for once to see the team not blow that lay-up.

The way this season is shaping up, it clearly will be one of transition. There is a real sense of reality permeating Berea at the moment and it's starting to filter to the fans. But for once, that sense of reality isn't as foreboding as the past. It's tinged with an optimism that finally the people in charge of the draft for this team actually know what they're doing. It's a nice, if

foreign, feeling.