Remember that homely girl in the ninth grade? The one who was always the butt of jokes during phys-ed? The skinny one with the gawky walk, the overbite and the kinky hair? Remember, when she came back from summer vacation for her sophomore year, how her straight lines had turned curvy and her goofy smile was now iridescent? Remember how she wasted no time in landing the captain of the football team, bumming out every other guy -- you included -- who walked the same halls?

Hey, it happens. It can even happen in the National Football League, where every dictum since the days of Pete Rozelle has had “parity” as its stated goal. If the NFL had its way, the floodgates would be forever open for any given team to beat any other team on any given Sunday, and to emerge as the surprise in any given year -- even if your favorite team's 2009 record was a measly 5-11.

A quick look at the record books proves that “parity” is not simply a goal or a dream but an NFL reality.

Since the year 2000, 15 teams that were 5-11 or worse have advanced to the playoffs the

following season. Let me repeat that for emphasis: *Since the year 2000, 15 teams that were 5-11 or worse have advanced to the playoffs the following season!*

Moreover, it's almost guaranteed that at least one such 2009 team will qualify for the 2010 playoffs. It's happened *every year* since 2001, including the watershed year of 2008 when the Dolphins, Falcons and Ravens all improved their records to 11-5 from 2007 records of 1-15, 4-12 and 5-11, respectively. The Dolphins' 10-game improvement was the largest over one season since the turn of the century. Twice in that same span, teams have improved by eight games: the 2001 Chicago Bears (13-3 after 5-11) and the 2004 San Diego Chargers (12-4 after 4-12).

How They Did It

The road to the playoffs has seldom been paved with the same construction materials.

The 2008 Dolphins, for instance, needed to name a new general manager (Jeff Ireland) and a new head coach (Tony Sparano). They chose an OT (Jake Long) No. 1 in the draft. Then Sparano unveiled the "Wildcat" offense that took many opposing defenses by surprise. And Pro-Bowl performances from rejuvenated LB Joey Porter and RB Ronnie Brown didn't hurt.

The 2001 Bears, like the '08 Dolphins, named a new general manager (Jerry Angelo). He immediately dumped QB Cade McCown, RB Bobby Engram and CB Thomas Smith. After the first game of the season, QB Jim Miller replaced the injured Shane Matthews. But the big difference was that RB Anthony Thomas was named NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year.

The 2004 Chargers chose Wade Phillips as their new defensive coordinator. They traded for QB Philip Rivers; and incumbent Drew Brees, faced with some real competition for the starting job, was eventually named to the Pro Bowl. Brees, along with fellow Pro-Bowlers RB Ladainian Tomlinson and TE Antonio Gates, were the scourge of the AFC.

The 2008 Falcons, like the Dolphins, named a new head coach (Mike Smith). But their wisest moves were probably drafting QB Matt Ryan, who was named AP Offensive Rookie of the Year,

and acquiring RB Michael Turner from San Diego, who tied for second in the NFL MVP voting.

The 2008 Ravens also got a new head coach (John Harbaugh) as Brian Billick was given his walking papers. The Ravens, whose stingy '07 defense returned almost intact, made two significant moves by drafting QB Joe Flacco and RB Ray Rice. Also added was LB Brendan Ayanbadego, who ended up at the Pro Bowl, along with LB Ray Lewis, LB Terrell Suggs, S Ed Reed and FB Le'Ron McClain.

Turning Over

Of course, hobbling to a lowly 5-11 like last year's Browns, in and of itself, seldom suggests a future upward trend. Case in point: the 2004 Browns dropped from five victories to four in '05.

But of the 24 teams that have sported a 5-11 record in any one year since 2000, 16 have improved the following year while four have remained the same and just four have gotten worse. Thus, if historical precedent holds true, the Browns have almost 7 chances in 10 of having a better record this coming season. Based on those same years, the chances of them making the playoffs after a 5-11 record are 33.3% (8 of 24 teams). Not great odds, but better than you might expect and a statistic that gives famously ardent Browns' fans some hope for the coming season.

Like many of the teams noted above, the Browns have a new general manager in Tom Heckert. (Actually, their first *real* general manager since the days of Ernie Accorsi.) But they've also got a *real* president (Mike Holmgren) who gives them their first *real* functional front office since the days of (shudder) Art Modell. Moreover, the front office finally believes in the capability of its head coach (Eric Mangini), which is a welcome change from the recent past.

Those of us who are Heckgrengini worshipers might pause to marvel at the significant overall on-field improvements that the Browns have already made.

Overall, the roster has added experienced vets (via free agency or trade) like OL Tony Pashos;

LBs Scott Fujita and Chris Gocong; QBs Jake Delhomme and Seneca Wallace; DB Sheldon Brown; TE Ben Watson; and RB Payton Hillis. Added via the draft were DBs Joe Haden, T.J. Ward and Larry Asante; RB Montario Hardesty; QB Colt McCoy; OL Shawn Lauvao; WR Carlton Mitchell; and DE Clifton Gaethers. Of course, not all of them will start, but early reports seem to indicate that all (save McCoy) have a pretty good chance of not only making the roster but actually contributing. Hardesty, in particular, had a great rookie mini-camp.

When the training camp opens in about 12 weeks--given that Delhomme will be the starting quarterback, Wallace the backup and McCoy a “QB in waiting”--the most intriguing positions seem to be running back and linebacker, where there are no stars but plenty of warm bodies. It will be interesting to see how offensive running plays are split up among Hardesty, Hillis (obtained from the Broncos in the Brady Quinn trade) and holdovers Jerome Harrison (he of the 286-yard game), James Davis and Chris Jennings. On defense, there are enough linebackers to make the training camp competition fierce: D’Qwell Jackson, coming back from an injury; experienced vets Fujita and Gocong; and Matt Roth, Eric Barton, David Bowens and Jason Trusnik--all late-season surprises in 2009.

However (as has been noted elsewhere under many other bylines), the most pressing need seems to be wide receiver, where a veteran free-agent speedster would give Delhomme a respectable downfield target that he doesn’t yet possess. The defensive line is also relatively thin, considering the status of Shaun Rogers (following a serious run-in with Hopkins security) and the wear-and-tear on the 30-something bodies of Kenyon Coleman and Robaire Smith.

But we all know that Heckgrengini is not done. “We finished a very productive draft,” Holmgren has said, “and now we’ve got to roll up our sleeves and fill out the roster with free agents.”

No Naysayers Allowed

For those of you naysayers who believe that 2010 will be nothing more than a rebuilding year, I say let’s wait and see.

Holmgren admits that he cannot expect to fix everything in one year. However, you don’t have to “fix everything” to be more competitive than the Browns were through the first 12 games of last season.

The homely 2009 Cleveland Browns might not magically be transformed into a prom queen in one year, but that girl certainly appears to have a fresh coat of lipstick and some fine new frocks.