The Cleveland Browns are scheduled to open training camp later this week and as befitting a summer like this, the energy level of fans seems low, at best.

Maybe it's the twin disappointments of what's gone on with the Cavaliers and Indians lately coupled with a season like the last that tried the patience of even the most hard core of fans, but the Browns are generating the kind of excitement usually reserved for another replay of A Very Brady Christmas.

And yet of the three professional teams in Cleveland, it may be the Browns that return to the winning circle sooner than any other. It just isn't likely to be this season, though it doesn't need to be. At this point for most mediocrity will do.

Entering into training camp, there are the usual battles for the usual roster spots. There's uncertainty at quarterback, again, and the receiving corps don't look to scare too many teams' secondary. But on the plus side this doesn't feel like a team at the crossroads anymore. A path has been chosen, finally, and now it's just a matter of seeing if that choice was the right one. It will take time.

New team president Mike Holmgren and his hand-picked general manager, Tom Heckert, bring a kind of credibility that's been sorely lacking on this team for years. The third person in this trio is, of course, head coach Eric Mangini. He's the weakest link, at least for now, because he was inherited. If he's with this ride for the long term, then he'll have to find a way to go from the red-headed step child to the favorite son.

For now, though, Mangini gets the benefit of the doubt. Not because he's a good head coach. At best, that's unproven. But because Holmgren and Heckert deserve the benefit of the doubt and if they feel that he's the right head coach right now then it's a decision to respect and not dwell on, so I won't, except for this.

Mangini may not be in the most untenable position imaginable, but it's close. For the most part, Holmgren kept Mangini on for this season not out of respect for the job he did last season but out of respect for a fellow member of the coaching fraternity. Holmgren knows the difficulties of the job and knows that trying to turn around a sinking ship like the Browns requires a much better crew than Mangini had (though that was mostly Mangini's fault).

So Holmgren gave Mangini a reprieve of sorts. It doesn't mean Mangini's on a short leash and that every loss, of which there will be several, is a reason to bang the drums anew for Mangini's ouster. But it does mean that Mangini needs to find a way to harness is dictatorial tendencies, work within a system in which he is, at best, the third most important person in the mix and make noticeable progress on his vaunted process.

It also means that player insurrections better be few and far between. It means, too, that Mangini and his staff better develop and execute comprehensible game plans. And perhaps most importantly it means that Mangini must embrace the players that Heckert acquired and develop them meaningfully.

I can't overemphasize that last point, by the way. The biggest difference between last season and this season as far as Mangini is concerned is that he's been completely stripped of the responsibility for picking the final roster. Indeed this was the wedge that came between supposedly lifelong friends in Mangini and George Kokinis and led to Kokinis essentially checking out early in the season.

If Mangini is going to survive, particularly with Heckert, he's going to have to accept the limitations of his current role with something more than a weak smile. It doesn't mean that Heckert's draft selections may necessarily have been better than what Mangini would have done (although all evidence suggests that would be the case 99 times out of 100). It just means that Mangini needs to continually demonstrate his appreciation that those decisions are not his responsibility anymore.

Too many times head coaches and general managers clash over this very issue. Arguing about it behind closed doors is one thing. But the key for Mangini will be to not take his complaints public by, for example, talking down a key draft choice or two at a weekly press conference because the player's not progressing or inexplicably keeping the players on the inactive list

week after week. The average fan may not notice, but Heckert will see it as an attempt to embarrass him.

If you want to know whether the Mangini/Heckert relationship is working, this will be it.

But the Mangini/Heckert dynamic is almost sideshow status at this point. The real key to the season is whether or not the latest regime can recapture this town. According to various reports, the Browns season isn't yet a sell out, which even in a down economy is a bit of a surprise. Cleveland's always been a Browns town but the fact that this team is struggling some to sell tickets tells me that at best fans are in wait-and-see mode.

That's certainly understandable given the way they've been repeatedly been mistreated under Randy Lerner's ownership. What's most amazing, though, is that Browns' fans don't even demand all that much. Ask a Browns fan what they want out of this season and to a person they'll tell you they'll be happy with an 8-8 season.

In other words, the bar is low.

The real thing this team needs for its rabid fan base to awaken is an identity. Under Lerner's ownership and all the various reinventions, the Browns have lost any sense of who they are or what they're trying to accomplish. As a result, Browns fans are left to wander about, clinging to their dog bones and wishing that a generation hadn't passed since the last time this team had an identity.

Fans may want to see T.J. Ward and Joe Haden resurrect the Dawg Pound and hope Montario Hardesty can be Earnest Byner reincarnate, but hopefully better things are in store than just trying to recapture a different generation's vibe.

This team not only has the opportunity but the mandate to capture a new generation of fans, a generation that has been lost first to a morally and fiscally bankrupt former owner who yanked the team from this town an second to a new ownership group that's been passionate but mostly incompetent.

In some ways, the Browns couldn't possibly be better positioned for a resurrection. This town is reeling at the moment and is just waiting for a savior. Another 6-10 season, though, isn't going to do it, even if that qualifies as incremental improvement from last season. It will take more.

Thankfully, though, at least team management and Browns fans are once again on the same page, and that page says that meaningful progress made by good, quality players that will be here for the next several years is crucial. Another season of drama punctuated by prima donna players and irrational coaches may just be the final straw for fans who just want to believe in something again.