Why is it in Cleveland that our sports teams always seem to offer the promise of a rosy future in the face of a dismal present? Our teams rarely exist in the here and now and instead offer up that the product on the field as the necessary boot camp to be endured in order to enjoy some mythical future where the sun is shining, birds are chirping and championship banners are getting hung.

Focusing now on the Cleveland Browns, though the Indians offer their own compelling example, they enter the bye week 2-5 buoyed by an impressive win against a defending Super Bowl champ but stuck in reality that no matter what they aren't good enough to make the playoffs once again.

Thus the question gets posed, do they try to win as many games now as possible or do they sacrifice short term for a longer term payoff? It's a dilemma that every bad team faces I suppose, but in Cleveland, where we're uniquely cursed, it's a dilemma we wrestle with year round, pick the sport. We just came off a baseball season where the future was the central theme. We're starting a basketball season with the same amorphous goal. But with a bye week for the Browns, the issue is need of a more immediate resolution.

First of all, the Browns are not really like the Indians in the sense that it's a matter of "letting the kids play." The Browns are actually a relatively old team mainly because they've drafted so poorly for so many years that the roster ends up having to be filled in with aging veterans on the backside of their careers.

Yet in the one position that counts the most, quarterback, the Browns have the full spectrum covered with an aging veteran, a mid-career backup and a promising rookie, and thus find themselves in the throes of a debate about their future in general and, in particular, whether "the

kid," Colt McCoy, should play.

Injured second string quarterback Seneca Wallace essentially framed this issue a few days ago when talking about the quarterback situation. On the mend and hopeful to be healthy enough to play next week, Wallace not only stated his case for being the starter but for having the Browns settle on a quarterback.

In large measure, Wallace is basically saying that the rest of the season is or should be about finding a quarterback to guide this team for the next several years and that he is just that quarterback. By extension he's suggesting that the Browns use the remaining games on the schedule to put themselves in a better position for years to come.

Wallace, most assuredly, can see what everyone else sees. Delhomme is no more the long-term solution for this team than if the Browns had brought Don Strock out of retirement, again. Wallace believes he's coming into his own, finally, and that his play warranted a much deeper look by the Browns' brass for now and for the next several seasons.

For Wallace, an 8-year career backup, his time is either now or not at all. He worries that the Browns will quickly lump him in with all of the other career backups in the league, a fungible bunch that floats from team to team in the offseason in favor of, once again, a more marketable backup with a glamour resume.

It will be interesting to see if club president Mike Holmgren, general manager Tom Hecker, and head coach Eric Mangini agree with Wallace's premise, not necessarily about Wallace starting but about the purpose of the rest of the season. They should.

Some have suggested that Wallace's public comments are the underpinnings of a quarterback controversy. That's a convenient explanation because, frankly, that's what we're used to seeing in Cleveland. But it's more than that. The real explanation is that it's just a matter of Wallace stating a case for his own future but couching it into the bigger picture in order to get the bosses' attention. Smart. Real smart.

If the goal is to win now, unquestionably a healthy Delhomme is best suited to that philosophy. He's had a good career, he knows how to win games. But it's also clear that his days as a starting NFL quarterback are quickly coming to an end. Whether it's physical or mental, he's clearly not the quarterback he was five years ago.

The counterpoint, though, is that this team, even with a healthy Delhomme, isn't going to win much anyway. A few victories would be nice, even a 7-9 season would seem like the playoffs. But in the grand scheme, those wins don't matter much except to alter the Browns' draft position. Wouldn't it be better then to seek progress with players that might actually be here for the next several years, irrespective of what it does to the win total?

Well, it depends on who you ask. Surely if you ask Mangini he would tell you that he will play those players that give the team the best chance to win. Holmgren, on the other hand, suggested that he'd like to see McCoy play several more games this season if only to figure out whether or not the Browns need to once again draft a quarterback. This obviously rattled Wallace.

Though Mangini would no more tip his hand on this issue than he would go to a schvitz with Tony Grossi, there will be telltale signs nonetheless. If Delhomme mends and finds himself back starting, then you'll know that Mangini still feels like his own future is in doubt. The best case for his return to the sidelines next season is made with wins, which is what happens when you have a head coach with an uncertain future. On the other hand, if Delhomme finds himself healthy but wearing a headset, then you'll know that Holmgren has played the trump card of his position and, not coincidentally, settled on Mangini's future, one way or the other.

Before Wallace was injured, I would have thought that Holmgren, Heckert, and even Mangini had mostly settled on Wallace at least for the rest of the season. He was playing well enough, which serves as progress in Cleveland, and had shown enough to suggest that after 8 years in the league as a back up maybe now was his time. Besides, that scenario would give them the kind of time over the next season or two Holmgren thinks would be needed to let McCoy develop.

But it's worth pointing out that in fact Holmgren, Heckert and Mangini had never publicly endorsed Wallace as the putative starter. Mostly he's always just been another player in the mix.

More importantly, Wallace did get injured and that paved the way for another quarterback to come in, a rookie whose near term future looked to be mostly about carrying a clipboard and looking interested by occasionally furrowing the brow. McCoy took off the redshirt he was slated to wear all season and stepped into the fray before anyone but McCoy thought he might be ready.

You can focus on McCoy's stats if you'd like, but that's at the expense of the context. First, McCoy had to face the Steelers in Pittsburgh, a team with as good of a defense as exists in the NFL right now. Next he had to face the defending Super Bowl champs, in New Orleans. Finally, in addition to the hostile environments, McCoy had to play in those games knowing that the Browns didn't have a credible backup if he got hurt.

McCoy handled that pressure well, so well in fact that he quickly gained the respect of his teammates and the interest of management. He's no longer the redshirt freshman in Holmgren's mind but the intriguing rookie that he'd like to see a bit more of sooner rather than later.

Wallace, most assuredly, can see this as well. That's why he decided to take the opportunity to state his case publicly for being the starter for the rest of the season and, in the process, force Browns management to frame up their goals for the rest of this season.

This may or may not work to Wallace's advantage but I admire his pluck. I'll admire it more if it ultimately results in the quarterback situation being settled for more than a game or two because from that decision flows most of what the future of this team will really hold.