While watching the highlights of the Cleveland Browns' win against the Carolina Panthers the other night, the talking head on whatever network happened to be on suggested that John Kasay's missed 42-yard field goal helped preserve head coach Eric Mangini's job. It was a throwaway line, got a few chuckles from whatever talking head was sitting next to him, and then they moved on to a story about an otter.

But it occurred to me that the tenure of Mangini, or any head coach for that matter, surely doesn't rest on the fates of the winds at Cleveland Stadium that caused Kasay's field goal attempt to veer left instead of through the uprights. Or does it?

Had the Browns lost the game, they would be 3-8 at the moment instead of 4-7. Viscerally, 4-7 just looks much better than 3-8. A 4-7 record still offers some hope. The team could go on to win their next 5 games and end the season at 9-7. The playoffs aren't even out of the question when you're 4-7.

A 3-8 record on the other hand is the public acknowledgement that the team certainly won't have a winning record. It also suggests that there is little likelihood a team bad enough to be 3-8 could ever win its last 5 games to at least finish the season at 8-8. A team with a 3-8 record already is preparing for the draft.

So maybe a 3-8 coach should be fired and a 4-7 coach given the benefit of the doubt and be evaluated in the context of the entire season come January. Certainly if you get your news in 30 second bits offered up by local and national news readers and drive-by analysts then it's easy to make that case, which is a long way of saying that had Kasay made that field goal the talk of firing Mangini might be louder today.

That doesn't mean it would make any sense, but I recognize these things tend to build a momentum all their own. The inevitable FireMangini.com web site gets up and running, a lazy local journalist interviews the attention junkie running it and all of the sudden there is a real debate among the fans about the fate of another head coach.

Meanwhile, in the real world where the people making actual decisions exist, it's hard to fathom that Randy Lerner or the person now designated to make such decisions, Mike Holmgren, would use a last second field goal as the lynchpin to fire Mangini just as it's hard to fathom that Lerner or Holmgren would be random enough to award Mangini a contract extension because that last second attempt missed. Indeed it didn't happen.

Decisions of that caliber have significant consequences. There's the personal side of it. The coach in question has a family. There's the business side of it. A coaching change is always a step backward, at least temporarily. The hope of course is that it will lead to two steps forward, but there is a transition period.

And that's the real issue in any regime change. At some point if you're always in transition mode then it becomes the state of the franchise. The Cleveland Browns have mostly been in that mode since their return and, to be charitable, it hasn't served them well.

My views on Mangini as a coach and a concept have evolved over time. At this juncture, I'm willing to give him and what he represents, the good and the bad, the benefit of the doubt and with it some more time. It all boils down to one salient point and all that flows from it: There is a world of difference between the feel of this Browns' team then the versions under Romeo Crennel, irrespective of the similarity in records.

Crennel was well liked, like a favorite uncle. But the players didn't respect him enough to play hard for him. They used his casual approach to attention and discipline to cut corners on their own. The players may be professionals but that doesn't mean they are going to act any differently then the guy in your office who hangs out in the break room all day because he knows the boss is out of town.

Mangini isn't anyone's favorite uncle. He may be a more user-friendly version of the studied grump that first appeared on the scene last year, but he's not the guy the players are going to go to for a restaurant recommendation. But it's crystal clear that the players respect Mangini far more than they did Crennel. They work harder for him and they play better as a result.

And that's mostly what you want out of your head coach. Consider, for example, the Carolina Panthers. John Fox is in the midst of a miserable year because management let the team get old all at once. They also don't have a viable quarterback at the moment and are essentially hosting open auditions. Yet that team was down 21-3 in a season where they've won only 1 game and still played hard enough to put themselves in a position to win the game.

That comeback, spoiled as it was by the Kasay miss, illustrated that the players have enough respect for themselves and their head coach not to quit when that would be the easiest road to travel. That's the key in this business. If you can keep the players focused irrespective of their current prospects, then better days likely are ahead.

Mangini isn't nearly as established as Fox but it would be hard to argue that Mangini isn't commanding the same level of respect from his players. They may only be 4-7, but it is still a record that is probably better than they deserve based strictly on talent. Mangini has them focused, irrespective of their current prospects and the players seem well convinced that better days are ahead.

That's a context you can't ignore, which is why it seemed so ludicrous to me the suggestion that Mangini's fate depended on the outcome of that Kasay kick.

It's understandable that the fans in this town are hungry for something good to happen. The Indians are a franchise in such disarray that the biggest news being generated this off season revolves around turning the ball park into some sort of high-priced winter playground. The Cavs

are struggling, as we all knew, and LeBron James returns this week to remind the fans that the playoffs are no longer assumed. Fans don't want to hear about transitions and time, particularly when it comes to their favorite team, the Browns. The patience of the average fan spans about 2 or 3 games. There is no respect for the difficulty of any job that isn't yours and that's particularly true in the world of sports. But this lack of patience, drive as it is by a media machine that has to crank out something, anything, 24/7, isn't the reason to take a more sober view.

I'm never the guy who says "well, if you told me at the beginning of the season that the Browns would be competitive enough to at least have a lead in every game they've played in, I'd take it." I just think that's a loser's mentality and moral victories in professional sports tend to go by a more familiar name, losses.

So I'm not excited about this team simply because it's piling up a Super Bowl-caliber record of moral victories. I'm excited because this team is making progress, which is the necessary first step. They've gone from unwatchable to frustratingly entertaining. They may not get to the Promised Land under this regime but at the moment it presents the best hope from the available alternatives. I just wish in leading that charge Mangini could resist the natural urge he gets to act like a putz anytime someone asks him to commit to a quarterback.