It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. There was little wisdom, there was plenty of foolishness. There was little belief and loads of incredulity, it was the season of darkness, the winter of despair. So went the tale of two cities, Cleveland and Denver, as they finished off their 2008 football seasons on similar footing, fans aghast at what had become of their teams.

And as those teams entered what looked to be that winter of despair, they were not unlike any other team at any other time looking for direction in the form of new head coaches. And so it went, Denver and Cleveland, tying their fates to coaches of similar fashion.

When Pat Bowlen for the Broncos and Randy Lerner for the Browns went looking for new leaders, they both were seeking a similar path. Now, the teams seem headed in opposite directions. For once, though, it appears it's the Browns heading down the right road while the Broncos are left tilting at windmills.

Almost as soon as Eric Mangini was fired by the New York Jets following a disastrous 2008 season he was hired by Browns' owner Randy Lerner. Lerner didn't even have a general manager in place, so excited was he about Mangini. This guy had head coaching experience, dammit. There would be no Romeo Crennel, redux.

Lerner appeared to put as much due diligence behind the decision to hire Mangni as the average mortgage broker did into loaning to suspect home buyers just before the housing

market crashed the economy.

A few perfunctory questions would have revealed that Mangini was a polarizing figure who, despite a fast start, wore out his welcome in New York just as quickly, branded as the cheap team's Belichick. Maybe he was trying too hard, maybe he didn't know any better, but Mangini took on the Belichick persona without any of the success that made that kind of surliness tolerable. In turn he alienated Jets players and the front office which, at the time, was being run by one of his best friends, Mike Tannenbaum. On the way he also took a blow torch to his relationship with Belichick, just because he could.

If Mangini found another job, it surely would be as a coordinator. Who'd take another chance on him as a head coach?

But Lerner didn't really know what he didn't know and hired him anyway, perhaps the most underwhelming hire since Chris Palmer anyway.

Meanwhile, four days later Bowlen had seemingly scored a coup by hiring McDaniels. He was the ultra successful offensive coordinator for the ultra successful Patriots who now seemed more than ready to take flight with his own team. He came without any of the baggage of Mangini and twice the praise. He carried, too, the blessing of Yoda Belichick.

Browns' fans scratched their heads, again. Mangini was a known and limited quantity while McDaniels was a local boy. He was born in Barberton, played high school ball at Canton McKinley and played college ball at John Carroll. If Lerner wanted to build some goodwill with an alienated fan base, McDaniels appeared to be the near perfect hire.

Yet Lerner gave little if any consideration to interviewing McDaniels because McDaniels lacked the one line on his resume that Mangini had and that was previous experience as a head coach.

Maybe Lerner really was on to something there.

In the run up to their first seasons, both Mangini and McDaniels had run ins with players. Mangini alienated Shaun Rogers by ignoring him at a team function. Mangini didn't score points with the new class of rookies he drafted (not well, by the way) when he volunteered them to help out at his New England sports camp.

McDaniels wasn't faring any better. He alienated Jay Cutler when Cutler learned that McDaniels was trying to trade him for Matt Cassel, a McDaniels protégé with the Patriots. Cutler then went public, saying he couldn't trust McDaniels. A Belichick progeny is a Belichick progeny and Cutler was quickly traded to Chicago.

On the field, it was McDaniels that got off to a fast start, winning his first 6 games. It papered over the fact that he was putting his faith in Kyle Orton instead of the more mercurial but more talented Cutler.

Mangini, meanwhile, had the roughest start possible. He was pissing off players left and right and still found time to engineer a coup of the front office by getting George Kokinis, the team's president and one of Mangini's few friends in the league, fired. Somewhere around the time that the team's record stood at 1-8 or so, few thought Mangini would make it through the season. As things spiraled out of control, Lerner decided to hire Mike Holmgren as his head zookeeper, which put Mangini's future further in doubt.

Then a funny thing happened. After those first 6 wins, the Broncos' wheels came off slowly, surely and ultimately. They lost their next four games, temporarily righted the ship with two wins, and then proceeded to drop their next four. A season of great promise ended at 8-8 and no playoffs. Despite the carnage, it was that last game that really served as a portent of things to come as the Broncos were drubbed by the Kansas City Chiefs 44-24. The Chiefs were quarterbacked by, ironically, Matt Cassel. To this day, the Broncos haven't recovered.

In Cleveland and against all logic and reason, Mangini's team won its last four games by unleashing a running attack that seemed to surprise every one. It was the most improbable win streak since the Indians started the 2002 season by winning 11 of their first 12 games. If nothing else, the win streak forced Holmgren to give Mangini another season.

This past off season brought still more turmoil for McDaniels. He traded disgruntled but talented

receiver Brandon Marshall. He also dumped two running backs, Casey Wiegman and Peyton Hillis, while getting little in return. The Hillis trade was particularly lopsided given what Hillis has become and Brady Quinn hasn't. Then McDaniels engineered the drafting of Tim Tebow anyway. The age of reason it was not.

With that as his backdrop, McDaniels started his second season looking down the business end of an angry fan base. He did nothing to change their minds. The losses haven't just piled up, they've become historic. Then McDaniels got himself embroiled in his own mini-me version of Spygate and embarrassed the franchise. It cost him the support of his owner. It cost him his job. The Broncos are now the Browns, 2008 edition.

Mangini, on the other hand, is experiencing his better days. Unburdened of all responsibilities except coaching energized Mangini in ways unimaginable. He shed some weight as he was shedding himself of most of his Belichick tendencies and rediscovered his own personality. And the players responded. They aren't perfect. Not by a longshot. But the Browns are 5-7 and by almost every metric you could point to are an improved team.

There sometimes is no accounting for the winds that blow in the NFL. McDaniels seemed to have it all and threw it all away so quickly. Mangini hung on by his fingernails and now has a firmer grip on his job than ever. And for the fans here in Cleveland, it's doubtful they'd trade places with their counterparts in Denver. As Browns fans are finding out, sometimes the best things in life may actually be not getting what you want.