Now that Dick Jauron has been hired as the Browns' defensive coordinator, it's a lead-pipe cinch that the team will eventually go back to the 4-3 alignment.

Personnel-wise, this presents a whole raft of problems. One, the Browns' cadre of 4-3 defensive ends is incredibly thin. But even more important is their seeming lack of middle linebacker candidates -- especially if they immediately convert from Rob Ryan's 3-4.

Basically, what you need is a King Kong with an Albert Einstein brain, Roadrunner speed, and as much disregard for human life as Anthony Sowell. You want someone who can call the defensive plays; someone who seems to know where the ball is going before it gets there; someone who can hit like a steamroller.

In the prototypical 4-3, middle linebacker ("Mike") is the position around which the whole defense revolves. Stick a JAG (just-a-guy) in that slot, and you have a lackluster defense. Stick an All-Pro in there, and you have a playoff-caliber unit.

To say that the demands of the position are unparalleled in all of sports is an understatement. Mike lines up about five yards off the line of scrimmage. On running plays, his main responsibility is to stop the runner -- especially on plays meant to go through the A and B gaps. On screens, Mike must get to the flat lickety-split, pursuing from the inside. On pass plays, he is usually tasked with trailing the tight end for five yards, not allowing a hot read or a hook. If the tight end heads upfield, Mike releases him and plays the short middle zone. In one type of 4-3 (the Monte Kiffin "Tampa Cover 2"), the MLB is given even more responsibilities. On pass plays, he is asked to help the outside linebackers cover short passes, or drop behind them in coverage

and protect the zone of the field from 11 to 20 yards out -- which requires even more speed than usual.

The best middle linebackers don't care about interceptions. They don't care about separating the ball from the ball carrier. They only care about separating the ball carrier's limbs (and/or head) from his torso.

Demands of the Position

During my sports writing career, I had the opportunity to meet two Hall of Fame middle linebackers in person. (I will not mention their names here. They may read this, find out where I live, and do to my home what General Sherman did to the city of Atlanta.) Off the field, even years after they'd retired, both were still intense, angry and intimidating. Maybe even bordering on insane. Even though I've always respected what they did between the white lines every Sunday, I do not want to meet either of them ever again. Ever.

Prototypical middle linebackers (Dick Butkus, Willie Lanier, Ray Nitschke, Jack Lambert, Sam Huff, Joe Schmidt, Chuck Bednarik) all exhibit the same qualities:

1) They are big. Though Huff was only 6-foot-1 and 230 pounds, he was big for his era and packed a punch that could take down Jim Brown. Today, your typical middle linebacker had better be at least 6-foot-3, 255 pounds.

2) They are strong and tough. Butkus appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* with the title "The Most Feared Man in the Game." Nitschke once had a metal tower fall on him during a Green Bay Packers practice. The tower drove a spike into his helmet, which is still on display in the Packer Hall of Fame.

3) They are agile. Lambert could get from sideline to sideline as fast as any free safety of the era, so Steelers head coach Chuck Noll wouldn't hesitate to put him into pass coverage 30 yards downfield. A *Sports Illustrated* article described Lambert thusly: "Close your eyes and you can see him ranging from sideline to sideline, a big wingless bird, always squared up to the line,

always around the ball."

4) They are smart. Though they may not have been straight-A students in school, they know the game of football well enough to call defensive signals. The best MLBs spend long hours in the video room looking for opponents' offensive tendencies.

5) Most of all, they make poor neighbors, as they are known to enjoy torturing small animals, like pets. Former Miami Dolphins quarterback Bob Griese remembers staring across the line of scrimmage at Butkus and actually feeling his legs turn to jelly. Bednarik (also known as Concrete Charlie) called today's NFL players "pussyfoots" who "couldn't tackle my wife Emma" -- while in his 70s! Lambert, ex-teammate Rocky Bleier once said at a charity roast, "likes to inflict a lot of pain -- and that's just when he's out on a date."

Who to Pick?

So who among the Browns' current linebackers might play middle linebacker next season? Unless general manager Tom Heckert drafts or trades for Godzilla, there are really only three candidates: Matt Roth, Chris Gocong and Scott Fujita.

Roth is 6-foot-4 and 275 pounds. Some posters on the Browns' message board say that he might end up as a three-point defensive end, given the team's dearth at that position. But it would seem like a waste of his speed (4.81 40) to stick him there. And, judging by what we've heard since he joined the Browns, he has the requisite mindset to play MLB. Ryan, Jauron's predecessor, had this to say about Roth last season: "I don't think there's a tougher guy -- a genuine tough guy -- in football. There's no question he's not pretty. He's smart, he's tough, he's so physical. I don't think there's a guy in the league that he'd back [down] to."

Fujita, at 6-foot-5 and 250 pounds, could fill the bill. He's already 31 years old, so by necessity he'd just be a place-holder for a younger player down the road. Of the three, Fujita is the quickest (4.59 40) and the most athletic (42-inch vertical jump).

If I were Jauron, I also would take a good, long look at Gocong, whose measurables are

impressive. He’s 6-foot-2 and 263 pounds, but he can do a 4.81 40. His vertical jump is, like Fujita, 42 inches. And he can bench-press 225 pounds 31 times -- five more than Roth. He’s only 26 years old, and he’s already got five years’ experience.

Whomever Jauron selects, or whomever Heckert supplies him, the Browns’ middle linebacker in 2011 had better be playoff-quality, because big things will be expected of him.