The Cleveland Browns upcoming season promises to be a mess, a spectacular mess. For once, that's a good thing. The alternative was a non-existent season and if there's something Cleveland fans dislike more than a mess of a team is having no team to contemplate.

That's where the season was headed until the National Football League Players' Association, the about to be re-certified trade organization that operated as a union in all but name only for the last several months, finally got religion. Spoiling for a fight more out of revenge than oppression, the NFLPA under the guidance of labor neophyte DeMaurice Smith and a gaggle of resume-building lawyers seemed hell-bent on litigating the owners to death as part of a strategy that had no end game.

So when the litigation path proved to be nothing more than an expensive lesson in delay, Smith started to understand that he was running a labor organization that in one key way resembles any other labor organization. The bulk of its members just want to go to work, do their job and collect a paycheck.

It wasn't an easy process sorting out the mess the NFLPA created with its ill-guided strategy. There was litigation to settle and egos to soothe. And for awhile anyway it looked like the best fans could hope for was a truncated season that would end with a champion that would always carry an asterisk next to its name in the record book.

Pressured by players with work to do and bills to pay and a disapproving court of appeals, the

NFLPA had no choice but to finally start bargaining. The details of the agreement at this point aren't even all that important to most fans. It's simply the fact that there is an agreement in place, it contains a hard salary cap and other financial constraints that ensure that the brains in the front office and not the checkbook of the owner will be the difference between the playoff worthy and the also rans, and it will be another 10 years before anyone needs to worry about this again.

That really is good news for all football fans in general and Browns fans in particular. Forget for now all that talk by those saying that the Browns were more adversely impacted by the lockout then other teams. There's no way to quantify that kind of argument. Instead focus on the beautiful mess that this season promises to be.

For example, this will be a season in which you won't be able to tell much without a program. (Aside: Here's a money making idea that I'll give Randy Lerner free: Electronic media guide app. Sell it for $2.50 and keep it updated with every roster move, and there will be plenty, in this upcoming season. You're welcome.) It's not just that their first round draft pick has the incredibly generic name of Phil Taylor or even the fact that Mr. Generic is, strangely, still holding out. It's that players will come and go with a frequency that would make even the Indians management blush. For example, remember Brodrick Bunkley? He's the players the Browns supposedly acquired from the Philadelphia Eagles on Saturday but who instead was traded Monday to Denver. It will be that kind of season.

This is also the season where the Browns are rebooting for the sixth time since 1999 (I'm counting the brief stint by Terry Robieski, who took over for Butch Davis, as a reboot), which would be typical if the Browns were, say, the L.A. Clippers. But this time it's not a reboot of the control-alt-delete variety, but a hard restart where the technician tells you to disconnect from the power source and wait a minute or two before powering up again.

A new defensive scheme, which means new roles and new players, coupled with a new offensive scheme, with too many of the same players in the same roles, wasn't ever going to be easy even if the Browns had been granted an exemption and allowed to not just practice throughout the lockout but were actually forced to conduct two-a-days every day since the Monday after the last Super Bowl. As a result there will be comically disappointing blown assignments on both sides of the ball, particularly early on. The theme of the season isn't going to be anything approaching "just win, baby" but more like "just walk upright, baby."

Still, it's the kind of mess that is the really hard work of any regime change. Eric Mangini had his own set of challenges when he came in, but his were mostly in trying to bring some level of discipline to a team that had turned into juvenile delinquents under the benign parenting of Romeo Crennel. But Mangini wasn't doing anything terribly different philosophically on either side of the ball. Shurmur has a more disciplined group of players but now has the more Herculean task of teaching them a whole new way of playing the game. It's like the difference between the challenge of getting your kid in college and getting your kid to make his bed.

The real excitement of this season will come not in the visceral progress of a won/loss record over last season's rather meager output, but in the actual progress of players like Colt McCoy. There's no question that the kid has the requisite leadership skills. There is question over how that will actually translate. If it does then this franchise will know that it finally has a quarterback.

Then there are the questions about the questionable receivers and the injury-prone running backs and a defense that for more than a decade now hasn't found a way to stop a decent running back. And really, how well will a West Coast offense perform in an East Coast (or thereabouts, anyway) environment or is there an appreciable difference between a 4-3 and a 3-4 defense?

The point, though, is that this is the really fun stuff of football. It's the kind of thing that fans really do want to argue about and not the boring details of preliminary injunctions and class action lawsuits.

The Browns are going to be a mess of a team this year, count on it. But the game itself and this franchise in particular is on as solid of footing as it's been on in a very long time. So no matter how it turns out, like a wayward favorite uncle, it's nice to have them back.

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