It will come as no flash bulletin to Browns fans that this franchise is cursed.

Nor is it exactly three-shots-fired-at-President Kennedy's-motorcade-caliber news that the Cincinnati Bengals are perhaps the most forlorn organization in professional sports.

But what may come as a surprise is that there is ample evidence to suggest that both of these are connected by a oft-forgotten thread.

Friday marked the 20th anniversary of the death of a football legend. On Aug. 5, 1991, Paul Brown died at the age of 82, having essentially single-handedly created the modern game and etched his name in history at each level of football, from Massillon High School to Ohio State University to the Browns and Bengals in the National Football League.

He's the only person to have been the creator, heart, and soul of two different NFL franchises, serving as the first coach for both. Even after he departed the sidelines from each squad – or

was forcibly removed from the sideline by a meddling Judas named Modell, as the case may be – the teams enjoyed much success.

But upon his death two decades ago, both the Browns and Bengals franchises have become wide-awake nightmares, traveling circuses that limp from season to season peddling empty promises, horrific front-office decisions, and leaving a trail of mentally dispirited and emotionally disemboweled fans in their wake.

It's become clear that both teams are haunted by the ghost of Paul Brown.

The evidence is dramatic and can't be ignored. Compare the records of the teams:

Since Paul Brown's death:

Bengals□□ 115-204-1 (.361)

Browns□□□□ 199-172 (.368)

Before Paul Brown's death:

Bengals□□□ 171-168-1 (.504)

Browns□□□□□ 385-226-13 (.627)

And this wasn't a gradual demise into darkness. This was like Satan with a digital camera.

The year before Paul Brown died, the Bengals won the Central Division, clobbered the Houston Oilers in a playoff game, and nearly reached the AFC Championship.

The year after he died, they went 3-13, and would not post a winning record for an incredible 14 consecutive seasons.

Four weeks after Paul Brown died, Bill Belichick coached his first game with the Browns. And thus began five of the most horrific years in Cleveland sports history – capped by the team ceasing to exist.

How else can you explain the sudden collapse of two completely separate franchises but in the death of their patriarch?

It's almost biblical. The Browns and Bengals are Isaac and Ishmael, sired by the same father but then set off to form completely separate, competing cultures. Only instead of Muslims and Jews, we have the Dog Pound and the Jungle.

Twice in the decade before Paul Brown died, the Bengals made it to the Super Bowl – a downright laughable mental image right now. And in that same decade, the Browns won five division titles and made the playoffs seven times – a better 1980s run than every NFL team but the 49ers. Another example of hallucinogenic drugs at work if seriously pondered in the 21st century.

The question is, why is the ghost of Paul Brown angry and how can we appease it? Or if it that doesn't work, exorcise it?

Browns fans could argue that Brown is still pissed that Art Modell fired him in 1962. The problem with that theory is that not only is Modell no longer associated with the team, he went on to win a Super Bowl in Baltimore. Wouldn't Paul Brown have been wiser to haunt Modell specifically rather than the Browns? After all, the Browns and their fans have suffered from

Modell's actions as much as Brown did.

Bengals fans have a more realistic explanation: that the death of Paul Brown led to the franchise being cursed with his son, Mike Brown, who has effectively run the franchise into the Ohio River like a three-legged rat scurrying from a fire.

Yet for as much as Mike Brown is a target for the Fans of the Striped Helmet, there have been too many other things that have happened that he can't be blamed for.

Top draft pick Ki-Jana Carter blowing out his knee in his first preseason game. Carson Palmer, after the year of his life, blowing out *his* knee in a playoff game with Pittsburgh. Ochocinco on *D ancing With the Stars*
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Keep in mind, too, that this is a league which, over these past 20 years, has celebrated parity. It's very possible to go from 5-11 to 11-5 in one year and making the playoffs ain't no big thing.

Yet since Paul Brown's death, in 37 combined seasons between the teams, the Browns and Bengals have made the playoffs a whopping four times. Prior to that, the teams had combined for 33 postseason appearances, including 13 trips to either the Super Bowl or NFL Championship Game.

Better still, since Paul Brown's death, neither team has even won a single postseason game. Meanwhile, the Seattle Seahawks, Carolina Panthers, Atlanta Falcons, and Arizona Cardinals all reached the Super Bowl.

It's also worth noting that since Paul Brown's death, Massillon Washington High School – which he turned into a football empire in the 1930s – has not won a state title in football despite several close calls. The Tigers reached the Division I state semifinals in 2001, 2002, and 2009, and got to the title game in 2005, which they lost, perhaps appropriately, to Cincinnati St. Xavier.

Granted, Ohio State did win a national title following Brown's death, but his stint with the Buckeyes is often an afterthought of his career. Plus, he still comes in well behind Woody Hayes as the program's most famous leader. Not the case with his other three teams.

So how can we reverse this curse thrust upon us by the bald-headed genius?

Cincinnati fans believe it's a simple matter of Mike Brown selling the team. Browns fans see it as more than that, perhaps calling for the need to delve into the occult a smidge more by sacrificing something (or someone) at his grave in Massillon. (Butch Davis' name quickly comes to mind as a possible candidate.)

Maybe it's bigger than just the Browns and Bengals. Maybe Paul Brown is upset that modern fans have more respect for Jimmy Johnson than himself. Thus, he lashes out angrily at his former teams as a way of drawing attention to his sadly fading legacy.

Or perhaps he punishes the Browns and Bengals as a way of reminding everyone that he brought these teams into the world and dammit, he can take them out.

Maybe education is the key. Maybe both teams should open Paul Brown Museums. Maybe both Marvin Lewis and Pat Shurmur could wear fedoras on the sidelines when the teams meet on opening day to draw awareness to this gridiron god.

Maybe we should offer Paul Brown's ghost the preposterous TV deal that Eric Mangini just got from ESPN.

What's truly heartbreaking about this is that Ohio utterly loves football. When you factor in its level of passion at every level of the game – high school, college, and pro – Ohio is coo-coo for gridiron Cocoa Puffs probably more so than any other state in the Union.

And Paul Brown is unquestionably the George Washington of Ohio football.

By all appearances, he's respected as such. The Bengals named their new stadium after him and, to their credit, haven't sold out to a whorish corporate name-change. Neither have the Browns. Even Massillon named its palatial high school field after him.

There have been different coaches, different players, different stadiums, and in the Browns' case at least, different owners. Yet their lot remains the same.

Whatever the answer is, the Browns and Bengals must join forces to fix it. We must put aside our disdain for each other and come together to find a solution that will be mutually beneficial to the entire state.

And again, perhaps the Bible can lead the way. For as much hatred and agony as was born out of the followers of Isaac and Ishmael, the two rival sons finally did come together.

To bury their father.