David Maxwell, Getty Images

A good way in which to describe the Cleveland Browns- other than “terrible,” of course- is “timeless.” The Browns are timeless, as immune from change as a small town in Alaskan bush country. Jump into the DeLorean , crank it up to 88 miles per hour and regardless of whether you go back to 2000, 2004, 2008 or today, you’ll find things haven’t changed much for Cleveland’s football team.

Put it this way: the Browns have played twelve full seasons since the Return in 1999. They’ve finished with a record of either 4-12 or 5-11 in six of them. They’ve accrued double-digit losses in nine of them. They’ve lost twelve out of thirteen season openers, all but one of those at home. Tim Couch has become Colt McCoy, Stalin Colinet has become Brian Schaefering, Scott Rehberg has become Jason Pinkston, but the results stay pretty much the same. That’s what I mean by “timeless.”

(Am I the only one who sometimes finds it hard to believe that the Browns have had two winning seasons since 1999? I know those winning seasons happened- I witnessed them, I look them up on Pro Football Reference and there they are. It just seems as if this team has gone 4-12 or 5-11 every… single… year.)

With this constant losing come excuses and rationalizations. We hear them every year. Sometimes we’re the ones making them. They come up year after year after year and, like the fortunes of the team, they don’t change much. We could have just as easily heard these excuses in 2001 as in 2011- and we probably did. Some make more sense than others, some flat-out contradict others, but either way they’ve become woven into the tattered, mildewed

fabric of Cleveland Browns fandom. You'll probably recognize them immediately.

*****

We're (insert) drafts away: Whatever the number, it's roughly the same as the number of drafts we were away in 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2009. But never mind that. The exact number of drafts varies according to level of optimism. If you're hopelessly optimistic it's one. If you're a little more guarded it's two or three. If you see nothing but doom on the horizon (or if you want to buy some time for your regime du jure) it's at least five.

We weren't supposed to compete this year: That's for the pie-in-the-sky types who actually believe these guys are being paid to field a competitive team- or at any rate one that doesn't gaffe itself out of a home game against the Cincinnati freaking Bengals. You're pissed off about the Browns losing another home opener because they committed eleven penalties and handed the Bengals a free play for the winning touchdown? Did you expect us to compete this year anyway?

The cupboard was bare: This excuse is employed in defense of the 4-12 or 5-11 record- complete with the requisite bad quarterback play, bad defense against the run and emasculating losses to Pittsburgh- invariably rolled out by the new regime. And for whatever reason, it's always "the cupboard was bare." It's never "the refrigerator was empty" or "the pantry wasn't stocked."

(Insert last regime) set the team back (insert number) of years: An excuse designed to give a new regime the leeway to field terrible teams for approximately the same number of years the old regime supposedly "set us back." For example, If Holmgren and Heckert are still in charge in 2013 and the Browns go 5-11 that season you'll hear their defenders excuse the record on the basis that Eric Mangini "set us back three years."

They can't fix everything at once: Sure, they haven't addressed the same weaknesses that have been there for over a decade. They still don't have a franchise quarterback, they still can't stop the run and they still can't get a pass rush. But they can't fix everything at once, you know!

He'd get killed behind this offensive line: This is the standard argument contra looking for a true franchise quarterback in the Draft. Memories of Tim Couch being battered to death behind swinging-gate lines have lingered long in the memory here, and Sofa's ghost is quickly brought up in any discussion of pulling the trigger on a quarterback. It's the mentality that believed Kellen Winslow to be a better first-round bet than Ben Roethlisberger. Of course, we all know Big Ben would have gotten killed behind this offensive line. We know the same about Peyton Manning, Adrian Peterson and other players who obviously succeed only because of the big uglies up front; no other reason.

We don't have enough depth: This really means, "We don't have enough good players." But it implies that the problems lie more in the capriciousness of injuries than the iron reality of suckitude. It is also a way of pretending that the Browns have good starters, which for the most part they do not.

We've had terrible luck with injuries: "We don't have enough depth" usually segues to or from "we've had terrible luck with injuries." It's as if no other team in the NFL has the same problem. Whenever anyone on the Browns gets hurt, whether it's a starter or the last guy on the roster, you'll hear "Just our luck!" or "Only in Cleveland!" Because, of course, NFL players only get banged up when they're wearing logo-less orange helmets.

We can't catch a break: Bottle gate and the Dwayne Rudd Helmet Toss (which together account for .015 percent of the 129 losses the Browns have sustained since 1999) are cited as examples of the Browns simply not catching a break, while the Pittsburgh Steelers are usually cited as a team that gets "all the breaks." See, it isn't that the Steelers have a coherent organizational philosophy, stable ownership, a stellar Draft record or just plain good football

players. They're just luckier than we are!

If not for (number) of plays, we would have won: The best example here is Butch Davis claiming that, other than about five game-breaking runs, the Browns actually played pretty good defense during Jamal Lewis's NFL-record 295-yard game.

We're building the right way: Meaning, through the Draft. Also, by avoiding any free agent with a pulse like the Spanish Flu and sticking to street-free agents and the detritus of other teams' practice squads. Phil Savage provides the example of building "the wrong way," mainly because of his 2006 splurge on LeCharles Bentley (whose knee the dastardly Savage just knew would go Krakatoa on the first day of camp) and Kevin Schaffer (who looked like Max Montoya compared to what Cleveland boasts at right tackle these days.)

He spends money and stays out of the way, what else do you want from him? It's the time-honored defense of our dear owner. Hey, he hires football people and lets them do their jobs. Would you rather have Al Davis or Jerry Jones? Names like Robert Kraft, Jim Irsay and the Rooneys* are conveniently omitted.

**- Unless there's a Browns fan with Steelers Stockholm Syndrome around, and that type, unfortunately, usually is. You know- the one that's always talking about how much he "respects" the Steelers, how they play "the right way," how he wishes the Browns played like them, etc. It's all true, but that doesn't make it any less annoying or pathetic.*

This excuse can be countered with an analogy. Let's say there's a parent who never sees or communicates with his/her child, leaves the child with a succession of foolish, incompetent caretakers while he/she gallivants around Europe- but sends the child a big fat check on birthdays and holidays. Does the big fat check make him/her a good parent?

You have to have patience: Sure, you've been watching a near-nonstop litany of awful football since 1999- but why are you getting so impatient about it? Rome wasn't built in a day, you know. (Of course, Rome didn't take twelve-plus years to build either.)

*****

What makes these excuses and alibis seductive is that they're rooted in truth. The Browns really are a handful of Drafts away from contending. The cupboards really are bare. Everything really can't be fixed at once. Which means that as long as this team is losing- and that appears to be for the foreseeable future- we're going to keep hearing them and saying them. That's just part of being a fan of this football team.