It wasn't too long ago that the conventional wisdom of the NFL know-it-alls was that rookie quarterbacks of any stripe or pedigree had to sit a few years before entering the harsh reality of professional football.

That's the wisdom certainly the Cleveland Browns president Mike Holmgren employed when he drafted University of Texas wunderkind Colt McCoy in the third round last season. Holmgren made no secret of his plan to build McCoy's skills by essentially having him watch a washed-up Jake Delhomme muddle his way through the season.

Well that didn't work out quite as planned and McCoy was forced into starting the team's last six games because Delhomme was injured and ineffective and so too was his primary back up, Seneca Wallace.

But a funny thing happened in those six games. McCoy showed enough promise that Holmgren didn't just accelerate the learning curve for him a bit. Instead he anointed McCoy the starter going into the 2011 season, a position McCoy occupies right now.

The way this situation has ultimately played out makes me question the wisdom behind Holmgren's initial plan. It also leaves me hoping that more than anything else, the person who learned the most last season wasn't McCoy but Holmgren.

In sum and substance, the 2010 season was the product of a major miscalculation on Holmgren's part. Whatever conventional wisdom that Holmgren used in deciding to sit McCoy was more in the nature of theory borne out of Holmgren's old school ways then it was an example of more contemporary thinking. As a quarterbacks coach first and foremost, Holmgren tends to respect the demands of the position a tad too much. Perhaps Holmgren was spending too much time ensconced in the grind of coaching Seattle to notice that young quarterbacks entering the NFL these days are light years ahead of their counterparts a generation ago when Holmgren first started coaching.

McCoy, for example, is a coach's son. But more than that, McCoy went through all manner of formalized training, from all the various camps he attended during his high school years to the even more formalized undertakings as a college athlete. McCoy and many like him specialized early and were schooled accordingly because, frankly, that's how young athletes are taught these days. Add to that the amount of games McCoy played while at a major college and you start to understand that McCoy wasn't just a wet behind the ears kind of kid when he came to the NFL.

And McCoy is just the local example. Sam Bradford in St. Louis played every snap for the Rams during his rookie season. Joe Flacco essentially did the same thing in Baltimore. The same is true for Matt Ryan in Atlanta. The list goes on and on. Cam Newton, perhaps the least experienced of this entire bunch, is probably putting the final nails in the coffin of old school conventional wisdom when it comes to playing rookie quarterbacks.

All of this is a long way of saying that for as much good as Holmgren has done and has brought to the Browns' franchise, he blew it when it came to McCoy and the team has suffered because of it.

Holmgren was hired in 2009 during the midst of another franchise meltdown as the result of an impetuous and ill-informed decision by owner Randy Lerner to hire Eric Mangini just days after being fired by the New York Jets.

Mangini got off on the wrong foot and then proceeded to double down repeatedly on his tendencies to lose friends and alienate associates so quickly and forcefully in his first season that it actually seemed like he wouldn't make it through 16 games. He did make it though it was obvious that the Holmgren hiring meant a limited run for the Mangini regime.

It was never really clear why Holmgren decided to give Mangini a second season. Even if he thought Mangini might improve, it would never have been enough. The two are philosophical opposites when it comes to how the game is played and coached and as consistent with his stubborn nature Mangini had no interest in altering his own views in order to conform to those of his boss.

Thus brought the completely lost season of 2010. Nothing substantive was accomplished and nothing substantive was carried over into this season.

This is why I bristle every time I hear that the Browns were impacted the most by the lockout. It didn't have to be that way. It was clear well before the 2010 season even started that there would be a lockout following it just as it was clear well before the 2010 season that Holmgren's lasting mark on the franchise would be to convert it to something more fitting to his style.

If Holmgren wasn't prepared to coach in 2010 then he should have found Pat Shurmur a year earlier (who easily would have taken the Browns' gig over an offensive coordinator position in 2010) and really used the season as a springboard for this one. Had Shurmur been in Cleveland in 2010, I have every confidence that he could have prevailed on Holmgren to relinquish his antiquated thinking about rookie quarterbacks and fans would have seen McCoy and the West Coast offense from the first game forward.

Instead, because of Holmgren's dithering, the Browns lost any chance to enter 2011 with anything resembling momentum and were forced instead to use a truncated preseason to make the major changes fans are just now starting to see on the field. The stutter steps of the first two games offensively are as sure a sign as any that the nuances of the West Coast offense aren't easily mastered.

This isn't to suggest that Holmgren has been a disaster in Cleveland because that is clearly not the case. Holmgren has brought a level of professionalism to this franchise that it hasn't had in two decades. Lerner, left to his own devices, would have kept hiring and firing indiscriminately based on the last person who happened to have his ear. With Holmgren around, Lerner can go back to do whatever it is that rich unemployed guys like him do with their time and we're all the better for it.

And while I'm a fan of Holmgren generally and believe that the overall talent on this team has improved dramatically in his short time, I don't want to lose sight of the fact that whatever progress the Browns in 2011 might make, it won't be nearly as much as they could have if Holmgren hadn't been asleep at the switch from outset.

I understand that Holmgren wanted to walk around with kid gloves and not upset the apple cart from day one. It was in marked contrast of course to how Mangini came in, ham-handed and almost deliberately going out of his way to find apple carts to upset. But it still doesn't explain precisely why Holmgren let this franchise lose an entire season just so that he could implement what he planned to implement anyway on the day he was hired.

There's no way of knowing what kind of shelf life McCoy will have as a quarterback in this league. But he does possess not just the requisite physical skills but also the requisite intangibles to be successful. Injuries more than anything else will dictate his future.

And for every game like McCoy played against Cincinnati, there will be a counterbalance represented by the kind of game he played against Indianapolis. That's what learning actually looks like in 3-D. It's just that by this point both the Browns and McCoy could be through most of these hard lessons had Holmgren been more assertive or progressive in his thinking. It's become the cliché by which Cleveland sports fans live their lives, but it looks like it will be another year until the Browns actually start producing real results.