Tim Couch is alive, well and living back home on the Bluegrass, but the specter of his dead career still haunts the halls of Berea and the dens/living rooms/man-caves of many a Browns fan. Ghostly images of pain, of a hyped and hallowed young quarterback repeatedly pile-driven behind collapsing offensive lines. Couch, it is said, was “ruined” in Cleveland; battered, bruised and beaten thanks to the incompetence of those around him.

The same thing is sometimes said for the latest in the seemingly never-ending procession of quarterbacks who have followed Couch in the plain orange helmet. Colt McCoy’s 2011 season may have come to a violent end against the Steelers- who else- and this just seems to be another example of a young signal-caller doomed to failure in the Factory of Sadness.

Yet even after the dreary sequels, the Frye’s, Quinn’s and McCoy’s, the original stands alone for one significant reason. Tim Couch, the very first draft pick of the new Cleveland Browns, is still the last quarterback to be taken with the team’s first overall selection. It’s as if what happened to the lanky Kentuckian was so traumatic, the organization has vowed to make sure it never happens again.

(As much is made of the Couch selection, I think the Courtney Brown and Gerard Warren picks were more damaging long-term. The Browns could have built a defensive identity and won games even with Couch had those picks worked out. Couch was certainly no worse than the guys Baltimore and Pittsburgh trotted out in those days. Of course, not trading that first overall in ’99 in exchange for Mike Ditka’s entire draft was the biggest mistake, but Dwight Clark

probably would have just blown those picks anyway.)

There's nervousness about committing a premium draft pick to a quarterback. It permeates this town. It's in the team-Butch Davis passing on Ben Roethlisberger in 2004; Phil Savage not wanting Brady Quinn "thrown to the wolves" in 2007- and it's in the fan-base. You hear it and you read it: *We're not ready for a franchise quarterback. Our line can't block. Our receivers can't catch. He'd get killed. We'd ruin him like we did Tim Couch...*

That unease has resulted in a decade-long parade of mediocre veteran free agents, mid-round draft acquisitions and in one case a waiver-wire pick-up (Derek Anderson) behind center. Colt McCoy is typical of the mid-round group: a college hero with "intangibles," limited physical attributes and a deep ball that floats as if it's filled with helium. McCoy is a spunky little guy with a great big heart who is now 0-7 against the AFC North as a starter.

Here are the quarterbacks the Browns have drafted since 1999 and their draft positions by round and overall selection:

1999: Tim Couch (1st round, 1st overall)

2000: Spurgeon Wynn (6th round, 183rd overall)

2004: Luke McCown (4th round, 106th overall)

2005: Charlie Frye (3rd round, 67th overall)

2007: Brady Quinn (1st round, 22nd overall)

2010: Colt McCoy (3rd round, 85th overall)

Setting aside Couch, the average selection number for Browns drafted quarterbacks since the Return is 92.6; near the bottom of the third round, in other words. In six of the twelve drafts since 1999 the Browns haven't selected a quarterback at all. The numbers don't bear out the image of a franchise that squanders pick after pick on young passers who are doomed to fail from the moment their name is called.

Instead they reveal a franchise that has consistently taken a half-assed approach toward what might be the single most important position in team sports. Twelve drafts have gone by since the Couch selection of 1999. The Browns are one of eight teams to go the entire decade of the '00s without using their first pick on a quarterback. (Joe Thomas was taken before Quinn in '07.) At least one team did so twice. Joey Harrington was as big a bust as Tim Couch, yet that didn't stop the Lions from going back to the well with Matthew Stafford eight years later.

In quarterbacks, as in life, you generally get what you pay for. Cleveland has used mostly middle-round selections on quarterbacks since the turn of the century, and has gotten mostly middle-round results. It's been a litany of marginal prospects with glaring physical deficiencies- lack of size in the case of Colt McCoy, lack of top-end arm strength in McCoy, Quinn and Frye and, in the case of Spurgeon Wynn and his 39.5 career passer rating, a lack of any discernible skill whatsoever.

Appropriately enough, Couch is still the best of the lot. In retrospect he probably wouldn't have been an elite quarterback in any situation; at best he could have been an Alex Smith-type "game-manager" who could help a decent team reach the playoffs but would be outgunned by the Brady's and the Manning's once he got there. That's still better than what Charlie Frye ever was, what Brady Quinn will ever be- and likely what Colt McCoy will ever be.

Obviously the struggle Cleveland's offense has endured over the years isn't the sole province of the quarterback. There's a large grain of truth in the cries of the naysayers. The receivers *have* been drop-prone and, um, without explosiveness. The line
has
had gaping holes. The play-calling
has
been stilted and unimaginative. But the fact is, the Browns haven't made a serious attempt to address the position since 1999. It's been a conga line of place-holders and prayers ever since Tim Couch and his decimated shoulder rode off into the sunset.

As for the notion that the Browns “aren’t ready” to draft a franchise-type quarterback, there is no buzzer that goes off and tells a team that it’s ready, that all the other holes have been filled and it’s time to go get the Guy. It doesn’t work that way. They’re there when they’re there. Indianapolis wasn’t exactly loaded to the gunwales with talent when it drafted Peyton Manning in 1998.But I guess no one in that front office spoke up and said, *“We went 3-13 last year. Obviously we aren’t ready. We need to wait till we’re ready. In the meantime, let’s trade down and take Andre Wadsworth.”*

Besides, it isn’t 1999 anymore. Bill Clinton isn’t in office, *American Beauty* isn’t in theaters and the Browns aren’t one of the worst teams the NFL has seen in a quarter-century. Bad as the current edition is, it’s no comparison with what the expansion Browns looked like. I don’t see Scott Rehberg and Rahim Abdullah out there in seal brown-and-orange. If they do take a young quarterback with their top pick in 2012 he’ll need help, for sure- but if he’s really the Guy he won’t be “ruined” by this team.

Eventually, whether it’s in 2012 or sometime afterward, this franchise has to take that leap. We can’t remain haunted forever. At some point the Browns must attempt to exorcise the ghost of Tim Couch and move forward with a quarterback they can build around and win with.