If you treat press conferences conducted by Cleveland Browns president Mike Holmgren as performance art, then his latest body of work, on display as it was Thursday, didn't quite measure up to the provocative performance of a few weeks back. Thursday he was calm, collected and all together non-specific. It's the kind of performance anyone could have turned in.

It paled in comparison to the star turn he made the last time he took to the podium spitting, spewing and basically blaming the media for being nattering nabobs of negativism who won't be getting any extra Browns playoff tickets from him. Like any example of performance art, it made you think even if that thought was "what the f _ _ _?"

But if you treat a Holmgren press conference as an opportunity to learn when exactly the Browns will quit wandering through the NFL like they're one of the Lost Tribes of Israel then it was a major disappointment. Holmgren took about 75 minutes to say what can be summed up in 3 words "stay the course."

Actually, I have no great problem with Holmgren's message, mainly because he's right. It's just that he's not the first or only Cleveland Browns' executive to espouse that view. Just the latest. Maybe I should reconsider changing the name of this blog to "Stay The Course, Again."

It's rather defeating to reminisce about such an inglorious past, but if one of the great truths in the NFL is stay the course, then the other great truth is that those who fail to learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.

In late November, 2006, with the Browns under the unsteady leadership of Romeo Crennel, a serial good guy but an undisciplined mess of a head coach, and reeling once again, general manager Phil Savage stepped to the podium to proclaim his faith in Crennel and to declare, wait for it, that the Browns would be staying the course.

Savage, like a country lawyer, made an impassioned argument for staying the course, pointing out that the really good teams and franchises got that way through stability. He then talked about Frank Beamer at Virginia Tech and how fans wanted him out after his first season and by staying the course things worked out well. He talked about Brian Billick at Baltimore and how fans wanted him out and yet he went on to win a Super Bowl before he, too, was fired. He then talked about Bill Cowher to presumably make the point about how good things happen when you stick with one horse.

When that 2006 season ended, the Browns sat where they sit today—4-12. And yet, in the short term, Savage was right. The next season the Browns won 10 games even though they didn't make the playoffs, a very rare occurrence in the NFL for any 10-win team. The problem? They really weren't on the right course.

The next season demonstrated that the previous was achieved mostly through smoke, mirrors, an easy schedule and one transcendent season by Derek Anderson, who then fell off the map. The Browns quickly regressed the next two seasons when their talent didn't match the assessment they had made of it. Crennel was canned, so was Savage and it was time again for a new course.

That next course lasted about a half season after Lerner impulsively hired Eric Mangini and then watched him lay waste to the franchise in near record time. Lerner quickly brought in Holmgren to chart still another course, which is where the franchise finds itself today.

But the back story to why all that occurred lies in the course the Browns were staying under Savage. Four months after Savage's impassioned "stay the course" plea Lerner visited various newsrooms around the state to essentially make the same pitch. It wasn't so much that he was making the case to keep Savage and Crennel as he was that Crennel and Savage needed much more time to see their plan through because the cupboard was bare when they arrived.

Lerner talked about how a good NFL team needs about 35 core players and at that time, early 2007, the Browns only had 18. In other words, there was much work to be done and it could only get done by, wait for it, staying the course.

The problem was that when things all came crashing down it turned out that Lerner (and Savage, by proxy) had missed the mark badly on the state of the team. Not only did it not have 18 core players, not even close, but they hadn't made any meaningful progress in adding to the mix.

Here is the list of players from 2007 that Lerner claimed were core to the Browns' development as a upper tier franchise if only the course would be stayed: "I have (Joe) Jurevicius, (Orpheus) Roye, Kellen Winslow, Braylon Edwards, Kamerion Wimbley, Sean Jones, Brodney Pool, Eric [Steinbach], Jamal Lewis, Andra Davis, Charlie Frye, D'Qwell Jackson, Leigh Bodden, Josh Cribbs for special teams certainly if not other, Steve Heiden, and emerging players like Leon Williams, Lawrence Vickers, Jerome Harrison, Travis Wilson."

Remember, that's 2007, just 4 years ago. Only 3 current Browns' players remain with the team: Steinbach (injured all season), Jackson and Cribbs. Arguably all 3 remain in the "core" category. But the rest of the list is mostly laughable, especially the inclusion of players like Jones, Lewis, Davis, Frye, Williams, Harrison and Wilson.

Yet that's the course that Lerner wanted to stay, at least until he fired Savage. It illustrates mostly the disconnect between theory and reality. The Browns' cupboard wasn't bare. There was no cupboard in the first place. It was a team with a random assortment of players that couldn't be counted on to accomplish much of anything, so it didn't. Had the team actually been further along, as implied by Lerner, it would be paying dividends today and fans wouldn't be getting another earful of stay the course messages from the latest architect.

So while I have no great quibble with Holmgren's message, it really was delivered in a vacuous way and without any real understanding of why it tends to fall on deaf ears. Far better than Holmgren, Browns fans know their history. They know what they've been promised and they know when they've been let down.

It would have been would have been instructive to hear Holmgren's or general manager Tom Heckert's view on how many core players the Browns need, how many they currently have and who they are as the context for staying the course they're on. But Holmgren was too busy dodging specifics for earnest eye-brow furling instead.

In truth, the Browns do have more core players now then they had in 2007, but the number is still south of 10 and that, ultimately, is the crux of the problem. I'm not sure that any NFL franchise can ever have or even needs 35 core players. But they certainly need at least 20 and can't win more than a handful of games when it's less then 10. When you consider that the Browns aren't even in double digits at the moment, you start to appreciate the enormity of the task at hand.

So it all boils down to the most operative question: "what course?" To Holmgren and Heckert, that course is the one that sees them gathering draft choices like game tickets at Chucky Cheese and making them count. It means eschewing any sort of quick fix through free agency. It means giving the players on board, at least those that are worth the effort, the time to grow. That's all well and good if they're right about what they have at the moment. They may be but too much history suggest otherwise.

Still, if this is what fans are being force fed and Holmgren and Heckert are really committed to building methodically, then they are absolutely right about one thing: they can't blow the upcoming draft. They have gathered together a number of picks and need to hit on nearly every one if this franchise is really going to take a significant, permanent step forward in the next few years.

If they don't then it will be time for Lerner to hire his next genius and set his next course and time for the rest of us to once again find another team to root for in the playoffs.