

Erik Cassano hits on the Ryan Tucker situation for us this morning, saying Tucker can be praised for coming clean and expressing remorse for hurting his team. But it doesn't change the fact that he did hurt his team, at a time when they need to show significant measurable progress early in the season, or run the extremely high risk of watching another season get flushed down the pipes before the first snowflake falls.



Sports fans. We're all hypocrites when it suits us.

It's not hard to find a San Francisco Giants fan who thinks Major League Baseball is turning Barry Bonds into a scapegoat in the ongoing steroid abuse witch hunt. The default opinion in the Bay Area is either "He has never taken steroids" or more commonly "He was just doing what baseball would allow him to get away with."

In Atlanta, it's probably a bit harder to find a Michael Vick defender among Falcons fans simply because most people view dog fighting as abhorrent and the evidence against Vick appears to be damning. But public demonstrations in support of Vick have shown that team allegiance, in many cases, is thicker than federal charges.

If Bonds were a Dodger or Vick were a Panther, the shoe would be on the other foot and Giant and Falcon fans would be the first to persecute the chief antagonist from a division rival. But that's the way it goes in sports.

We in Cleveland have been guilty of it, too. When Albert Belle was smashing a thermostat, reportedly throwing a baseball at photographer and allegedly chasing Halloween house-egggers in his SUV, the Cleveland fans and media turned the blindest of blind eyes to his off-the-field antics because he was hitting homers and the Indians were winning.

If Belle had been a member of the White Sox two years earlier, how would we have reacted? Be honest.

Now the spin spotlight falls on Ryan Tucker, the Browns offensive tackle who will miss the first four games of this season after testing positive for a banned substance. The test occurred during the offseason, with the league suspension handed down Friday.

Tucker will be allowed to participate in games and practices during the preseason, but will be completely eliminated from all team events from the end of the preseason until Oct. 1. He'll miss the extremely important September gauntlet against the Steelers, Bengals, Raiders and Ravens, which will almost certainly determine the course of the season, and might slay or save Romeo Crennel's job.

On the surface, it seems like a fairly minor situation, and the fans and media have been quick to play it that way. Tucker took something he shouldn't have as he attempted to rebound from mental-health issues during last season. Based on his [comments Friday](#), he knew what he was doing was wrong, knew he was probably going to get caught, and when he did, he offered a full confession and will take his punishment without a word of complaint.

In an era when Rafael Palmeiro might have perjured himself in front of Congress concerning steroid use, Tucker's candor is refreshing. Right?

If you ignore the whole pesky detail about the crime already having been committed, I suppose.

Tucker is quickly transitioning from a rock at right tackle to one of the most unreliable members of the Browns offensive line. It appears that whatever happened to him last year -- which is still shrouded in mystery by both Tucker and the team -- was not his fault. But he rebounded quickly, told the media the start of camp that "I feel great," and for the first time since returning to the league, it appeared the Browns would have some real depth protecting the quarterback and opening holes for the running game.

Now, with this latest stumble -- which was very much his fault and very much

avoidable -- he hinders the Browns offensive line yet again, and through what might end up as the most important stretch of the season.

The Browns luckily have a ready-made backup plan in Kevin Shaffer, who might now have a chance to claim a starting job for keeps, even when Tucker comes back. But, as always happens when a player is sidelined, everyone else in the unit moves up a step, creating a domino effect.

The Browns simply cannot absorb another hit, injury or otherwise, to the offensive line between now and the time Tucker returns from suspension. At the rate Browns O-linemen normally fall, who is willing to make that bet?

Tucker can be praised for coming clean and expressing remorse for hurting his team. But it doesn't change the fact that he did hurt his team, at a time when they need to show significant measurable progress early in the season, or run the extremely high risk of watching another season get flushed down the pipes before the first snowflake falls.

For that, Tucker deserves criticism. And he probably deserves a spot on Crennel's bench, even when he returns from suspension.