

While the Browns are contending for a playoff spot this season, next year is when Browns fans should be able to enjoy true contention and the team should be poised to go deep in the playoffs. And the team has a key decision to make at a crucial position running back. With Jamal Lewis on a one year deal, no clear cut backup waiting in the wings, and no first round pick ... the Browns are going to have a tough call on what to do with J-Lew.



It was a long and choppy road to get to this point. A road littered with the careers of innumerable players who never lived up to their draft position and who contributed next to nothing in regard to making the Cleveland Browns a respectable, much less powerful, football team.

Tim Couch, purported franchise QB. Bust.

Courtney Brown, purported franchise defensive lineman. Bust.

Gerard "Big Money" Warren, purported co-anchor of a dominant defensive line. Bust.

William Green, purported 'franchise' running back. Bust.

From the day those players mentioned above were drafted, they were never, not once, worth what was spent on them in regard to money nor were they ever

remotely close to being worth that draft position again. In fact, if you look at the draft history of the Cleveland Browns from 1999 to 2003, the Browns may have been more adept at turning 1st, 2nd and 3rd round picks into future 6th and 7th round picks than any team in the NFL.

But seemingly out of nowhere and overnight, the 2007 Browns are 5-4 and knocking on the door to the organization's first playoff appearance since 2002.

Getting there this season would certainly be nice. If not for the valuable experience it would give this roster of players, at least for the validation it would give a football-starved fan base.

That playoff berth is a possibility because the Browns upgraded key positions on the field this season. Joe Thomas was drafted to anchor the offensive line at the critical left tackle position. Eric Steinbach was signed as a free agent to play next to Thomas at left guard. Braylon Edwards elevated his game and has earned the right to be mentioned in the same breath as the elite receivers in the league. Derek Anderson overcame a miserable preseason and an incompetent Charlie Frye to bring play making ability to the quarterback position and Jamal Lewis was signed to run the football.

But reaching the playoffs this season is a short-term goal for this club. Because while the offense has improved by leaps and bounds for all the reasons cited, the defense is old, slow and ineffective. You may get to the postseason, but you're not staying long even if you make it.

Next year is where all eyes should be focused.

Next year is when the Browns have an opportunity to remake their defense and improve exponentially. Without the benefit of a first round pick (a pick that was traded to Dallas for the rights to draft Brady Quinn and a pick that declines in value with every Browns victory) the Browns will need to improve that defense through free agency and with some 2nd day 2008 NFL Draft picks.

It's way to early to know who will be 'franchised' by their respective teams, but some of the unrestricted free agents on the defensive line and at linebacker include;

Albert Haynesworth, Terrell Suggs, Jared Allen, Justin Smith, Lance Briggs and Karlos Dansby. All would be significant upgrades over the guys currently filling their positions with Cleveland.

Defensive line and linebacker help and potential replacements for the old (Willie McGinest, Orpheus Roye) and the mediocre (Andra Davis) would upgrade those positions. It would also do wonders to improve the play of the defensive backs that currently are chasing receivers all over the field for 10 seconds on every pass play.

The defense needs that makeover. And the defense will definitely be the focal point of the Browns brain trust in the off-season.

But before we get too comfortable and forget about messing with that high-powered offense, we need to address what may become a glaring hole.

Jamal Lewis signed a 1-year, \$2.5million dollar contract with the Browns this past March. There are incentives that could push the deal to \$3.5million. But the Browns are facing a decision at the running back spot that could affect the offense in a big way.

Lewis has given this Browns running game legitimacy. And by doing so, he's given the passing game, more specifically the play-action passing game, legitimacy as well.

The more casual fans will watch Lewis bang into the line for short gains and wonder where the value is in that. But the more educated fans appreciate the fact that defenses have got to account for Lewis on the field in both short yardage situations and in early down and distance situations. Because while Lewis is not the threat he was when he was drafted in 2000 to run by you, he seldom is brought down by one defender and he's

seldom stacked up for a loss on a play.

Early in the Steelers game this past week Lewis knocked LB James Farrior and S Anthony Smith backward on separate plays for good chunks of yardage. The Browns took advantage of Lewis on the goal line later by faking the handoff to him and hitting Lawrence Vickers on a 2yd TD pass. This is exactly the value that Lewis brings to the offense. And to take that a step further, there is no one else on this current roster who could play that role.

Jason Wright is a fine change of pace back. He has better agility and better hands out of the backfield and he has a role with this team now and in the future. But at 5'10" and 210lbs, Wright doesn't have the bona fides that Lewis at 5'11" and 250lbs has in terms of delivering a blow and demanding attention from multiple defenders on the field.

Time after time this season, most notably with his 4 scores against Seattle, Lewis has cashed in his short yardage and goal line carries for first downs and touchdowns. That's a sight for sore eyes to fans that watched double reverses and full back option passes in similar situations in seasons past.

Lewis also brings a presence and credibility to this young offense that is tangible. His ability is respected throughout the league. He's run in big games and he plays the game hard.

He does have a lot of wear on his tires being 28 years old and in his 8th season. But unless the Browns are willing to pay a king's ransom for San Diego backup RB Michael Turner come next spring, re-signing Lewis is the best option they have. While it's true you can find running back gold in the later rounds of the draft, those late round running backs typically are not big producers in their first season. Drafting Lewis's replacement next April is a fine idea if you bring Jamal back for one more year behind Steinbach and Thomas.

Lewis is not in a position next season to look to break the bank in terms of a contract. He's had a solid year behind a solid offensive line but there are very few teams looking to make a soon-to-be 30-ish running back a huge, multi-year deal. If he's willing to agree to another deal similar to the one he's playing under this season, perhaps with a few more guaranteed dollars, then the Browns should go out of their way to make that happen.

After watching luminaries like Green, Abdul-Karim

al-Jabar, Terry Kirby, Lee Suggs and Eric R. Riddick tote the rock, the Browns have someone worthy of 20 carries per game and someone capable of elevating those around him.

At least for one more year.