

Before the Browns don pads and engage in full contact drills, they will already be without Ryan Tucker, who is recovering from a hip injury, Daven Holly, lost for the year to knee surgery, and Joe Jurevicius, struggling to come back from multiple knee surgeries, the result of being the latest Brown to suffer a staph infection. In Erik Cassano's latest, he talks about the effects of these injuries, and says that The Injury Bug may be the only thing that can stop this Browns team from being great this season.



Let's behave like true Clevelanders for a second and ask, "What could possibly derail the 2008 Browns season?"

The Browns cup of promise runneth over as training camp opens this week, at least more so than any Browns team since the late '80s. The weaknesses of the roster, such as cornerback depth, are relatively small and kind of nitpicky. The strengths are many: A deep offensive line anchored on the left side by two Pro Bowl-caliber blockers in Joe Thomas and Eric Steinbach. An improved defensive line featuring Shaun Rogers, a nose tackle who might finally command double teams and open up rushing lanes for Kamerion Wimbley.

The Browns have two starting quarterbacks. Hate on Derek Anderson or Brady Quinn as much as you would like, but a number of NFL teams would gladly take either and give him a shot under center.

The receiver and tight end corps is fronted by a couple of thoroughbreds in Braylon Edwards and Kellen Winslow. Donte' Stallworth is a third option who would likely be a second option on a lot of teams.

So with all this rampant optimism, how can we balance it with a nice shot of

negativity to give it that true Cleveland feel?

Don't worry. The Browns are already doing it for us. Or has the boulevard of broken dreams that was LeCharles Bentley's short stay as a Brown already passed from conscious thought?

It's the middle of summer. It must be time for a visit from the Injury Bug. That annoying little gnat that buzzes around the collective head of the Browns seemingly every year, claiming weeks and months and seasons, and in the cases of Bentley and Gary Baxter, maybe even careers.

Did I say annoying little gnat? Maybe more like a horrifying, carnivorous harbinger of doom. Like a piranha with wings.

The Injury Bug can strike swiftly and severely, crushing a season in the time it takes for a knee tendon to burst, as it did with Bentley. Or it can nick you to death with a thousand well-placed paper cuts. If the Injury Bug is to ruin the Browns' '08 campaign, that would appear to be its method of operation.

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It appears Jurevicius, aging but still one of the better possession receivers in the league, will begin the season on the physically unable to perform list, holding him out until after Week 6 at the earliest. Another setback, and he might call it a career.

Right now, the Injury Bug's bite is a relative nibble. Tucker was slated to enter the season as the starting right guard, but the Browns have other options on the roster. Losing Holly hurts an already-depleted cornerback group, but he was considered a dark horse to land a starting job at best.

Losing Jurevicius for months would have caused more damage last year when he was the second wide receiver. As the third receiver, there is a better chance his production could be replaced by someone already in camp. Maybe Travis Wilson can finally start earning his keep.

If this is all the blood the Injury Bug draws this season, the Browns will still field a team capable of playing deep into January. But when three potential starters go down with long term injuries before the start of training camp, you have to wonder if this is only the tip of the iceberg.

It's not a problem if Tucker can't take the field until sometime in September. It will become a problem if second, third and fourth injuries befall the offensive line. It's not a problem if Jurevicius has to wait until October to see if he can make one last push before retirement. But it will become a problem if Jurevicius is followed into sick bay by some combination of Winslow, Edwards and Stallworth.

The problem with injuries is not just the loss of the player himself. It's the fact that each injury depletes the depth of the roster a little bit more and forces players further down the depth chart to step up and assume larger roles. If any team in the NFL is entering December starting three backup offensive lineman and plugging in the fourth receiver as a starter, that team is likely in a heap of trouble in the playoff race.

Injuries are common in football. Even the best of the best, teams like the Patriots and Colts, have to deal with their share. It's not part of The Cleveland Experience to have your team's players end up in an assortment of braces and casts. But it is part of The Cleveland Experience to see a few cracks in your team's armor and wonder if a complete structural failure is forthcoming, only because it has happened before.

As Training Camp 2008 opens, we have every right to finally feel optimistic about the coming season of Browns football. But as long as the Injury Bug hovers around our heads, buzzing sweet nothings about ruptured tendons and staph infections into our ears, we will always wonder what is just around the corner.