

## Rewarding Faith

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Browns fans are hungry. Man, are we hungry. The "Super Bowl" chants on the opening day of camp were proof positive of that. After eight mostly miserable years since returning to the league in 1999, our Brownies broke through with ten wins last year and are now widely thought of as a young dangerous football team on the come. Fans in Cleveland have stuck behind this franchise when all sense of logic and reason would dictate otherwise. Will the fans faith be rewarded this season? Gary gives his thoughts.



It's such a fine line between delusion and genius that it's often hard to tell which is which. Leave it to Cleveland sports fans to blur the line even further.

Generations of disappointments notwithstanding, fans arrived at Cleveland Browns training camp on Wednesday unabashedly chanting "Super Bowl." One would have thought that given how quickly the Indians dashed fans hopes for a big year that these same fans would approach the upcoming Browns season a tad more cautiously. If anything, they are being even more reckless with their hearts. That's not all bad.

There is an inherent need we all have to believe in something, anything. When it comes to sports, we want to believe in the teams we follow. We want to believe that our favorite players are capable of greatness even as they disappoint us again and again. We want to believe that good will prevail over evil and in the power of redemption. We believe all of this because there is nothing more satisfying than faith rewarded.

The implied question of the entire Browns 2008 season is just that: will faith be rewarded? Fans in Cleveland have stuck behind this franchise when all sense of logic and reason would dictate otherwise. For years, they believed that Art

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Modell, so sincere until he wasn't, would find the right formula. When he packed the team's bags permanently for Baltimore, whatever faith was temporarily shelved was instantly and permanently revived when the NFL did the right thing and gave the city a new franchise a few years later.

A sight that is forever permanently etched in the collective conscience is that of the Browns re-emerging against the Pittsburgh Steelers on a Sunday night in 1999. It's a buzz that still lingers. Even after the Browns had their collective heads handed to them that evening in a 43-0 blowout that wasn't as close as the final score, the buzz remained. In reality, the excitement of this season is really just a higher decibel level on a sound that's been there all along.

The point I think is that even if the Browns fall flat on their face again this season, Cleveland won't suddenly turn into Atlanta, as lousy a sports town as their exists in America. While the Falcons, for example, scramble to rebuild a modest fan base turned off by a franchise that banked heavily and lost on Michael Vick, it's hard to imagine a similar scenario in Cleveland. The worst thing that ever happens with Cleveland fans, no matter how they're kicked about, is that they occasionally turn even more bitter and cynical. But they hang in nonetheless.

If faith is going to get rewarded this season, much of it will depend on players staying healthy. Granted, it's a pretty obvious observation that tends to be true of most teams, but ask yourself when was the last time that's all the Browns' season hinged on.

The extended exhibition season being played out at Progressive Field actually provides a rather fine contrast between those expectations that are justified and those that aren't. It seems so clear now that the Indians couldn't stand pat and simply hope to get better that you wonder how Indians' general manager Mark Shapiro could have missed that one. Pinning a team's fortunes largely on a steady line of progress by young, unproven players, a closer twice defying the laws of reason and probability, and a remarkable comeback by a designated hitter that can't hit seems silly in retrospect. And that's not to even get into the near

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systemic aversion to actually bringing in players with a proven track record that contributes to the state of things.

In contrast, the expectations of the Browns' upcoming season seem much more rationally based. The strength of the team is the offensive line and it is a unit that relies mostly on veterans with a proven track record. Left tackle Joe Thomas is only in his second year, but he's already a far more advanced sophomore than, say, Asdrubal Cabrera was entering into his second (but first full) season with the Indians. Derek Anderson, as quarterback, had a breakout season. Though a veteran by this point, he is perhaps the one player upon which you can tag with hope, as in the team hopes Anderson can progress even further in his second full year as a starter.

The defensive line, the team's glaring weakness a year ago, has been rebuilt in much the same way Savage rebuilt the offensive line the last few years, with veterans. That doesn't mean it will play as well as the offensive line, but then again it doesn't have to in order for dramatic improvement to be shown. The receiving corps, including tight end Kellen Winslow, Jr., is, again, a veteran unit with some measure of accomplishment. Jamal Lewis at running back is still a highly-skilled.

On special teams, the Browns again are relying on veterans in every key position. And these aren't veterans like David Dellucci of the Indians is a veteran. They are veterans who have actually have a level of accomplishment stretching beyond a half season.

The one thing you do notice as you wind your way through this team, though, is that it lacks depth, meaning that its health will determine its fate as the year goes on, even more so than the schedule. The offensive line, again, has about the greatest depth on this team, the defensive backfield the least. The rest of the units are somewhere in between. The questions regarding head coach Romeo Crennel, may remain but they are severely muted once he turned the offense over to someone actually competent to run it. In short, there are concerns and counter

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arguments, but they rely far less on speculation for resolution than did those with the Indians.

It's entirely possible that the Browns will crumble under the white hot spot light of a schedule that places them front and center several times this season. But the veteran make-up of this team does provide a decent level of comfort that a total meltdown is unlikely. Faith may not get rewarded this season. Inded it may never be rewarded to the fans of this town, all of whom deserve more than a little something for their efforts. But at least in the short term, the harmless chanting of &quot;Super Bowl&quot; each time the team takes the practice field in Berea these days seems a little less loony than it did just a few years ago.