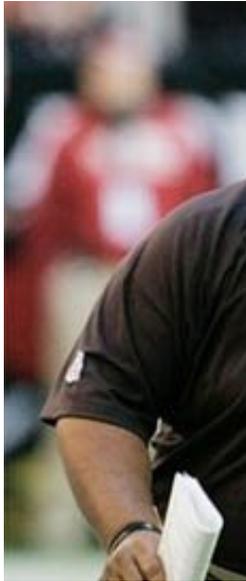


What happens when you follow a seemingly-endless string of losing seasons with a winning season, then follow said winning season with a couple key additions to the defensive line? Unbridled optimism, that's what. Especially in Cleveland, where it doesn't take much -- if anything -- to get fans hyped over the Browns. Last night Browns fans got zocked in the face with a hard dose of reality. And Erik Cassano talks about it in his latest column for us.



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Hope is a default setting during the late summer in Cleveland, particularly in a year when the Indians have tanked and the Browns are about the only thing standing between us and a long, cold, dark winter.

So this summer, we focused on all our Browns have to offer us: An exciting offense, an improved defense and prime-time games for the first time in ages. For the first time since Bernie Kosar was sidearming it to Webster Slaughter and Ozzie Newsome, it really felt like the Browns had arrived on the national scene as a force to be reckoned with.

Perhaps our judgment was a bit clouded. Maybe the hope and hype gave us amnesia, as we blocked out all points of criticism that Cleveland football fans -- historically a very knowledgeable lot when compared to some others -- are so darn good at identifying and picking apart.

In Monday's first-half embarrassment against the Giants --which albeit ended as a

respectable 37-34 loss -- it was all there again. The Browns first-teamers didn't take a step backward from 2007. They took a time trip with Doc and Marty back to 2006. Or 2004, when interim coach Terry Robiskie famously described a blowout loss as "men against boys." Or 2000, when Chris Palmer described the Browns as a "runaway train";

Yeah, it's only preseason. But it was a preseason game in which most of the starters played the entire first half. More importantly, it was a preseason game against the type of competition the Browns will have to beat if they ever want to play deep into January. And they rolled over and died.

Monday, the Browns' starters were manhandled by starters of the defending Super Bowl champs in every possible way. New York's defensive line pushed the Browns' offensive line around, save for a respectable job done by Joe Thomas on Osi Umenyiora. The Browns' defensive front didn't make much headway against the Giants' offensive line. Football, as many fans around here know, is a domino effect. Lose the game in the trenches, and you'll probably lose it every other way.

The Browns sure did in the first quarter. Ninety-eight yards in penalties, including a couple of dumb-beyond-words interference calls on secondary hopeful Michael Adams, who might not be hopeful for much longer. An erratic-armed Derek Anderson forced passes into ill-advised coverage, and showed the same inability to complete the underneath throws that he did a year ago.

The mistakes didn't stop there. Just to emphasize how completely the wheels had come off, there was a blocked punt for a safety, a free kick return for a touchdown off the safety, and a fumble return for a touchdown. The man carrying the ball on the latter play was Jamal Lewis, who likely would have plowed in for a touchdown himself had he and Anderson managed to complete a fair exchange of the ball.

Domenik Hixon. Remember him. He had three touchdowns for the Giants in the first half. He looked like a Hall of Famer for one night.

The cherry on the sundae? How about Anderson apparently suffering a concussion and possible hand injury when he was driven into the turf on a second-quarter sack. Brady Quinn took over as Anderson went to the locker room with a pained expression on his face. Quinn managed to restore some respectability to the QB position by going 7-for-12 for 124 yards and a touchdown, but it all came welling up from the bottom of a 27-point hole.

Anderson wasn't alone in sick bay. Josh Cribbs also went to the locker room in the first quarter with an ankle injury and was not heard from again. Brodney Pool joined Anderson in the concussion club.

It is all enough to make you need to breathe slowly into a paper bag. If it was a regular season game, you might seriously think about a plastic bag. But even after the safety, the fumble, the missed throws, the penalties and the injuries, we still haven't gotten to the blood-boiling crux of the matter.

The Browns, once again, looked rudderless. They looked ill-prepared mentally from the kickoff on. They were making the same dumb, undisciplined mistakes that have plagued this team since the days of Chris Palmer. The Browns looked as if they were caught by surprise at the level of energy the Giants showed playing in front of their home fans for the first time since winning the Super Bowl.

And when the score got out of hand, they stopped trying, going into mental power-save mode. It took a couple of touchdowns by Syndric Steptoe and Eric Wright (an interception return) to restore some sense that the Browns weren't counting down the minutes until they could board the bus for their hotel.

Too harsh a critique for the second game of the preseason? In this case, I'd argue it's not, only because this is the same team that let the lowly St. Louis Rams jump out to a 14-0 lead last year. This is the same team that couldn't get its act together enough to win a game in Arizona, or when that didn't work, win a hotly-contested game in Cincinnati in the second-to-last week of the season. Either one of those games could have won the Browns the division.

The Browns have enough physical talent to win double-digit games again this year, even against a tough schedule. And it's worth pointing out that, from the outset, the Browns didn't have Braylon Edwards or Shaun Rogers in uniform. But that still doesn't set up an excuse for coming to the stadium mentally unready to compete.

That blame falls on the shoulders of Rob Chudzinski, Mel Tucker, and most of all Romeo Crennel. In much the same fashion as the seeming inability of Eric Wedge teams to perform when the pressure is on, the coach/manager might not take the field and play the game, but when an inability to look prepared and rise to the occasion becomes habitual, it's an honest question to ask where the culpability of the coach comes in.

Anderson takes his share of the blame, too. As he did in the Cincinnati game last December, he once again became flustered when adversity reared its head, and looked noticeably frustrated at the end of several drives. His emotions started snowballing, and he lost any shred of ability to take control of the game, as he did so well in the first quarter against the Jets last Thursday. Call it the C.C. Sabathia Factor.

A decent second half marked by solid play from Quinn and Ken Dorsey helped soothe the bruises from the first half, and the Browns actually outscored the Giants 31-14 after the 23-3 debacle of the first quarter. But that shouldn't stop fans and media alike from hanging all kinds of red flags on the circumstances that put the Browns in a 30-3 early second quarter hole.

So much attention has been paid to the strengths and weaknesses of the roster. But perhaps the Browns' real enemy is the mindset that is bouncing around between their collective ears when they take the field each week. It starts with Crennel and the coaches, continues to Anderson and spreads throughout the rest of the team.

Assessing blame isn't the point, though. The point is, this team's mindset heading into games needs to improve, or the '07 season will look like an aberration, and the '08 team will look like the overhyped, overrated media monster that the skeptics say it is.

If Anderson and Co. put this team in a mistake-riddled 30-3 hole against the likes of the Giants during the regular season, they aren't going to rally to make it a three-point game, let alone win it.