

You'll likely hear a lot of "slate gets wiped clean" talk out of Berea in the next week or so, as the Browns are busy (and maybe literally) licking their wounds after the team's first winless preseason since 1972. The games in the exhibition season aren't for real, but the issues surrounding the team are, and the consequences can be. With training camp over, the exhibition season crumpled up and thrown away and the Cowboys squarely in the crosshairs, Erik Cassano gives us some other things to chew on over the next week.



You'll likely hear a lot of "slate gets wiped clean" talk out of Berea in the next week or so, as the Browns are busy (and maybe literally) licking their wounds after the team's first winless preseason since 1972.

All that matters is the next game on the schedule, you'll hear Romeo Crennel and a number of players say. The season is a grind. You have to take it one week, one quarter, one series, one play at a time.

Tres

Eric Wedge.

I don't totally buy that. The games don't count, and all will be forgiven if the Browns are sitting pretty with a 3-1 record after Week 4. But until that happens, a tone has been set heading into the regular season, and there are a number of questions that now need to be answered.

A team doesn't go through what the Browns just went through during the exhibition season without lugging some backage toward the season opener.

The offensive line needs to answer for allowing itself to get pushed around against the Giants and Lions. Derek Anderson needs to answer for his role in the first-quarter meltdown in New York. Braylon Edwards needs to go back to elementary school health class, the first aid unit, where you learn that running in

stocking feet alongside someone who is running in cleats can cause bodily trauma.

Mel Tucker needs to be viewed less as the man who is destined to save the defense from the evil, power-usurping clutches of Todd Grantham, and more like an unproven rookie defensive coordinator who might need time to grow into his job.

Romeo Crennel needs to answer for the waves of penalties and teamwide lack of competitive fire, particularly in road games. These are issues that have been ongoing, even before Crennel arrived on the scene.

Phil Savage needs to address the dangerously-thin cornerback situation, and if he pulls a Mark Shapiro, deciding that inaction is the best course of action until it becomes utterly apparent that the players and coaches won't be able to right the ship themselves, that should be noted.

The games in the exhibition season aren't for real, but the issues surrounding the team are, and the consequences can be. With training camp over, the exhibition season crumpled up and thrown away and the Cowboys squarely in the crosshairs, here are some other things to chew on over the next week:

The Browns will be much better at home than on the road.

If the Browns want to mount a serious playoff run, last year's 7-1 home record can't be a fluke. But if the preseason is any indication, it appears the Browns will be able to protect their house most weeks.

The overall vibe I got after watching the Jets and Bears games was that if the starters had played the entire four quarters (even the backup-starters of the Chicago game), the Browns probably would have won both games.

Unfortunately, the sample size from the Jets game was too small, as a weather delay shortened the night for the first-teamers. But they scored a touchdown on their first possession, so it's reasonable to think that in a full game, Anderson and Co. could have put up 30 points.

Against Chicago, there was no question that Brady Quinn was the best QB on the field for either team. That's not saying a heck of a lot when your opponent employs Kyle Orton and Rex Grossman, but the inability of Ken Dorsey and the third-stringers to convert two fourth-quarter drives into scores is probably something that would have been less of a problem with Anderson or Quinn under center, Joe Thomas and Eric Steinbach blocking and Cleveland's usual compliment of offensive weapons running routes in the end zone.

Depth is a major concern at most positions.

Before you can build depth, you need to build a competent corps of starters. That's what Savage has had to do, with more than just a few bumps in the road, since taking the Browns' GM job in 2005. Only last year did his labor begin to bear fruit.

The Browns finally have some good starters, capable of representing the team in Hawaii each February. But behind them, Savage still has a lot of work to do.

The injuries of the preseason have exposed a soft underbelly at a lot of positions, namely defensive line, linebacker, safety, cornerback, wide receiver and tight end.

A case could even be made that the depth on the offensive line isn't as good as once thought. The Browns are very thin at the guard positions, and by extension the center spot. That was even before Rex Hadnot suffered a knee injury Thursday. When you get right down to it, the only two players standing between the Browns' O-line and total mediocrity right now are Thomas and Steinbach

. Those guys must stay on the field for every game.

Like Phil Dawson? You might fall in love this year.

The last remaining 1999 expansion Brown, Dawson saved the team's bacon often last year with a number of clutch kicks. If this preseason is any indication, Dawson might be in line for a career year. And his teammates might need everything his leg can give them.

Streaky offense plus porous defense equals a lot of close, high-scoring games. If the '08 Browns follow the formula of the '07 Browns, engaging in a lot of 41-38

overtime games, Dawson will be called upon to swallow some ice water and drill the pigskin between the uprights in backwinds, headwinds, crosswinds, swirling winds, in blizzards, on the embarrassingly
ad turf of Heinz Field in Pittsburgh, and in any other potential situation you might be able to concoct. -b

There is a reason why Browns kickers tend to become legends, at least in Cleveland. Few teams, if any, demand more from their kickers. Dawson should view his career kicking for the Browns as a point of pride, above and beyond simply holding down an NFL job for almost a decade. He could have been some pansy who spent his entire career kicking in a dome for the Minnesota Vikings or Atlanta Falcons. But he's spent his career in one of the few cities where a placekicker can be a tough guy.

Braylon Edwards might be the biggest difference-maker on offense.

No one wants to devalue the importance of Joe Thomas to the offense. After years and years without a premier left tackle, Browns fans are finally seeing how the other half lives. No one wants to take away from Kellen Winslow's ability to fight for yards after the catch like a man possessed. No one wants to tell you that Jamal Lewis isn't one of the most dangerous running backs in the NFL with a lead in the fourth quarter.

But the Browns offense just hasn't been the same without Braylon Edwards.

If you took an informal poll of opposing defensive coordinators and asked them what Browns player they are most worried about containing over the span of four quarters, Derek Anderson might get some votes, along with Winslow and Lewis. But Edwards is the player who probably makes most defensive coordinators wake up in a cold sweat in the week before facing the Browns.

He's Cleveland's best playmaker. He stretches the field, he makes acrobatic, how-did-he-do-that catches and he's extremely difficult to cover one-on-one. If a Browns opponent is up by seven points or fewer, it's always in the back of their collective mind that Cleveland is one Anderson-to-Edwards strike away from tying the game or taking the lead.

That's a valuable weapon to have in the psychological-warfare game. Without

Edwards, the Browns offense lacks that quick-strike fear factor, and it just isn't as dynamic. Drives become more methodical and plodding as opposing defenses relax a bit without the acute threat of getting burned by a big play every time Anderson drops back.

Having Donte' Stallworth should help retain some of that big-play threat when Edwards isn't on the field. But Edwards is the real cause for the sweaty palms on the opposing sideline.

Special teams could make or break the season.

... And right now, it's not looking good.

As integral to the Browns' success last year as anything, the Browns' special teams play in 2007 helped lengthen the field for opponents and shorten it for Anderson and the offense.

Josh Cribbs established himself as an elite kick returner last year. His touchdowns received most of the press, but game in and game out, he gave the offense good field position. On the flip side, punter Dave Zastudil and the coverage units -- fronted by the exceptional tackling of Cribbs -- helped keep opposing offenses pinned back.

Now, Cribbs is out until further notice with a high ankle sprain, backup Syndric Steptoe hurt his shoulder in Thursday's loss, and the tackling on punts and kickoffs as a whole was among the biggest disappointments of the preseason.

If the Browns continually lose the field position battle through poor kick returns and lousy tackling, it's going to make scoring harder for the offense, and it's going to make preventing scores harder for the defense.

The special teams, perhaps as much as any other unit or player, needs to step up their collective game in time for Week 1. A return to health by Cribbs would also help greatly. If the special teamers are struggling to make plays, the Browns will struggle to win. It's that simple.