

Brady Quinn is now the true meaning of a season that has no other meaning. The playoffs are all but out of the question after Sunday's debacle versus the Ravens, which dropped the Browns to 3-5. Quinn, the golden boy whose arrival was foretold with every Derek Anderson interception, will make his first NFL start under humble conditions Thursday against the Broncos. Erik Cassano talks about the dawn of The Quinn Era here in Cleveland.



A reading from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Lerner:

Lights, please.

“And then in the field were fans watching their team by night, and lo, an angel of the Owner appeared unto them, and they were afraid. But the angel said to them, 'Do not fear, for I bring you tidings of great joy; for unto you this evening in the city of Berea is born a savior, 'tis Brady Quinn.' And then in the sky appeared a great heavenly host, singing and praising, saying 'Glory to Quinn in the highest, and peace on Earth to all men.'”

That's the true meaning of the season, Charlie Brown.

Brady Quinn is now the true meaning of a season that has no other meaning. The playoffs are all but out of the question after Sunday's debacle versus the Ravens, which dropped the Browns to 3-5. They would now need six wins in their final eight games to finish 9-7 and even get into the conversation for the playoffs.

Messianic coronations should feel a little more majestic, shouldn't they? Quinn, the golden boy whose arrival was foretold with every Derek Anderson interception, will make his first NFL start under humble conditions Thursday against the Broncos. You might fancy him a savior, but he has to earn that title first. For now,

he's a project, a specimen, the football equivalent of a September call-up.

Just so long as we're clear on the ground rules. The popular line of thinking among Browns fans is that Quinn can't possibly be worse than Anderson, whose two-plus years as an NFL starting quarterback may very well have reached its nadir with Sunday's comically-bad fourth quarter lob to Baltimore's Terrell Suggs, who ended up putting the game out of reach with his touchdown return.

But the idea behind starting Quinn, no matter if it was spurred by Randy Lerner, Phil Savage or (less likely) Romeo Crennel, isn't that he's going to produce an instant upgrade from the inconsistencies and repeated mental errors of Anderson. It's that they have to see what Quinn can do over an extended period.

If Quinn struggles even more than Anderson, Crennel still has to stick with him for the rest of the season. If the Browns start ping-ponging between two QBs, as Butch Davis did with Tim Couch and Kelly Holcomb five years ago, the end result is a team that belongs to no one. Two starting QBs is one too many.

Sunday's fourth quarter meltdown by Anderson provides an adequate gut-check moment for a transition. Anderson was far from the only culprit in allowing 24 unanswered Baltimore points in a little over a quarter. The defense was as soft as it had been all season, Rob Chudzinski insisted on pounding Jamal Lewis into the teeth of the Ravens defense even after the Cleveland lead had disappeared and Braylon Edwards had one of the most spectacular dropped passes of the NFL season.

But when the Browns needed a leader in the huddle, when they needed someone to be a bridge over troubled water, Anderson was making a bad situation worse with poor throws, rushed decision-making and an overall lack of composure with the game on the line. This has been an ongoing problem with Anderson, and is perhaps the most damning argument against him.

A quarterback can stuff a stat sheet, and Anderson surely can, but like pitchers in baseball and goalies in hockey, the wins and losses fall squarely on the QB's shoulders. If an NFL quarterback falls apart with the game on the line, he's going to be reviled in his city, no matter what he did for the first three quarters.

And that's how we have gotten to this point. The Brady Quinn Era hasn't necessarily begun, but the Derek Anderson Era has ended with a fourth-quarter nightmare in which Anderson was outplayed by Ravens rookie Joe Flacco.

Stuck in limbo, waiting to see if Quinn is the long-sought franchise quarterback for the Browns, are Crennel and Savage. Their jobs now largely hinge on developing Quinn into the QB that Anderson never was. Thrusting Quinn into the starter's role midseason doesn't give them the best chance for success, but that's immaterial now. The wins and losses Quinn produces will determine whether Crennel and Savage keep their jobs.

Working in their favor is Quinn's college resume as a four-year starter at Notre Dame, groomed in Charlie Weis

' pro-style offense. The only real red mark on Quinn's record as a Brown so far is his preseason start against the Lions back in August. Other than that hiccup, he's performed reasonably well whenever called upon.

But it's a small sample size that includes a handful of plays in last season's finale against the 49ers as his only regular season experience. Since leaving college, Quinn hasn't been the QB that the other team will break down on film all week. Holcomb could attest to the fact that it's a whole different world when you go from reliever to starter.

Perhaps, in that case, it's good that Quinn is starting after a short week. It gives Denver fewer days to analyze what little NFL footage there is of Quinn, and it gives Quinn less time to stress over his first NFL start. Any leg up at this point is an advantage.

From this point forward, for the remainder of the 2008 season, the Browns are all about developing Quinn, enduring whatever hardships are necessary with an eye toward 2009 and beyond. It was a group effort to convert this season from one of promise to one of maintenance, and it will have to be a group effort to make sure 2009 doesn't follow the same path.

At the center is Quinn, the only guy who is now standing between the Browns and a larger rebuilding project.