

We recently ran a front page poll asking for fan opinion on whose side they were on in the whole Kellen Winslow/Phil Savage spat. Over 60% backed Winslow. In his latest column, Erik Cassano says it's easy to see why. K2 is passionate, competitive, and tells it like it is. And has somehow managed to escape criticism when fans start assigning blame for what has become of the Browns 2008 season.



Even at his polarizing worst, it's easy to see why Kellen Winslow remains a fan favorite in Cleveland.

He's passionate. His competitive fire burns at white-hot levels. He plays through immense pain. He'll fight for the first down marker like he's starving and the last morsel of food on Earth awaits on the other side.

He'll tell it like it is, consequences be damned. If he has a problem with management, the whole city is going to hear about it. Few players can get under the skin of management the way Winslow does, and a city like Cleveland is always going to appreciate a public figure who is willing to stick it to the man.

So it's no surprise that when taking sides in Winslow's rift with Phil Savage several weeks ago, a majority of fans sided with Winslow and accused Savage of trying to put the clamps on the organization's dirty little staph infection secrets.

With the Browns' 2008 season now all but in the trash bin, Winslow has escaped widespread criticism. The popular view seems to be that throughout all of this, while Derek Anderson choked, Braylon Edwards dropped passes, the defense whiffed on tackles, Rob Chudzinski and Mel Tucker failed to make in-game adjustments and Romeo Crennel played his fiddle as Rome burned, Winslow has

been one of the few guys pouring out his blood, sweat and tears trying to win games every week.

It's one of the great advantages of being an emotional player in an emotional sport. An approach that is heavy on histrionics makes it seem like you care more than the next guy, and the fans and media respond to that.

Of course, it's not all playacting. Winslow does fight through pain to play, and he does use his naturally-hot motor to rack up yards and keep drives going. He can help a team win.

Unfortunately, as proven on Thursday night, he can just as easily help a team lose. Those heart-on-sleeve traits we celebrate can also backfire. They certainly did against the Broncos.

It's a crying shame because this was the game that could have rebuilt Winslow's reputation with the Browns front office, which might have been quickly coming to the conclusion that the offense operated better without him.

For three quarters, Winslow was Brady Quinn's do-everything man. By the time the game was over, he had snagged 10 catches for 111 yards and two touchdowns. He caught them short, mid-range and long. He was a game-changer, one of the few receivers in the league who can seemingly win games all by himself.

But then, in the fourth quarter, the double-edged sword that is Winslow's temperament swung the other way.

With the Browns leading 23-13 and driving for the dagger score, Winslow negated a third-down completion to Edwards with offensive pass interference. As sometimes happens when Winslow lets his emotions do the driving, he seemed to get overzealous in jockeying for position on a crossing route, planting his defender's rear end on the turf in the process and netting the drive-killing penalty.

On the ensuing drive, Jay Cutler found receiver Eddie Royal for the 93-yard touchdown strike that brought Denver to within 23-20 and permanently tilted the game momentum in the Broncos' favor.

On the next drive, Winslow fought for extra yards on a third-down completion that

would have netted a first down, but was stripped of the ball in the process. On the ensuing drive, another Denver touchdown, this time for a 27-23 lead.

To Winslow's credit, he did fight back to have a key 30-yard reception on the next Cleveland drive, which helped set up Jamal Lewis' one-yard touchdown plunge that briefly gave the lead back to the Browns.

But once Denver took the lead again and the Browns received the ball for a last-ditch drive, Winslow let a 4th-and-1 pass sail right through his hands, inserting the final nail into Cleveland's coffin.

The end result of Winslow's game is something of a microcosm of the Browns' entire season: A performance built on promises not delivered. Hope assembled in grand fashion, only to come crashing down through inexcusable mistakes at the worst possible time.

In the end, Winslow isn't any better or worse than the other Browns players who have shuffled on and off the field this year. He's as much a victim of his own inconsistency as Edwards, Anderson and anybody on the defense not named Shaun Rogers.

We'd all like to think that playing through the pain of scarred knees, fighting for the yard marker and standing up to management all count for something. But Winslow is on the same sinking ship with everyone else, and if he's not helping to bail water at the most critical times, he's going to be swimming for the lifeboats along with everyone else.