

Following Monday's 30-10 loss to the Eagles, Braylon Edwards spouted to the media his belief that he's underappreciated in Cleveland. That he has a target on his back in Ohio because he went to the University of Michigan. That he doesn't care about the fans and what they have to say about him. Which of course means he cares very much about what others have to say about him, otherwise his reaction to criticism wouldn't be so bitter. Erik Cassano weighs in with his thoughts.



Give Braylon Edwards this much credit: He stays true to himself.

Sports commentary is so drab with countless talking heads and scribes droning on and on about "team first," "grind it out" and "shut your mouth and play." It's like Eric Wedge's Indians postgame press conferences have taken over the world.

Edwards and the rest of his Browns teammates have undoubtedly heard time and time again how great teams are focused on common goals, how great teams stomp out the brush fires of infighting and pettiness before they become raging conflagrations. How truly great players know how to make their teammates better.

Edwards tried that shoe on last year. It didn't fit. So rather than become something he's not, this year, the back of the jersey is the new front. Jeff "Independent Contractor" McInnis pioneered the style with the Cavs a few years back.

This year, public whining, outbursts and self-martyrdom are in on the shores of Lake Erie. Even Phil Savage got in on the act. And if the general manager can't resist the occasional public F-bomb, what can be expected of his players?

Following Monday's 30-10 loss to the Eagles, Edwards set the gripe bar so high that other notable whiners like Kellen Winslow and Jamal Lewis will be hard-pressed to top it. It would take something along the lines of Brady Quinn complaining that women don't find him attractive enough.

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If it wasn't official before, it's official now: 2007 was an aberration for Edwards. The well-behaved, mostly-reliable, pass-catching Edwards was a one-year wonder. His default setting is loud-mouthed, mercurial, and way too concerned with what others have to say, which plays into the mental cloud that seems to consume him whenever he's open and notices the ball sailing toward him. It's a dark side of his personality he'll have to fight for his entire career.

Players like Edwards become habitual pass-droppers for one reason: When a pass is heading toward them, they feel 75,000 sets of eyes staring at them. That's why Edwards seems to drop easy passes in the open field, then proceeds to catch difficult passes heaved through a thicket of defenders. He doesn't have time to think about the difficult catches.

That hypersensitivity seeps out of Edwards in multiple ways. After the Dallas game in Week 1, when LeBron James showed up at Cleveland Browns Stadium to root for the Cowboys, Edwards wondered aloud if LeBron even likes playing for Cleveland. It didn't amount to anything, but no one could have blamed Cavs management for going to Browns management and telling them to cram a sock in their wide receiver's mouth.

It's ironic, since a dislike of playing in Cleveland was exactly the sentiment Edwards conveyed to several national media outlets in 2006, after the Browns careened to a 4-12 record.

Idiotic braying from receivers is something of a phenomenon around the NFL. The Browns have two Chatty Cathies in their receiver corps alone. But what Edwards did trumps even the memorable "piece of meat" comment from Winslow earlier this season.

Winslow's remark was aimed at Browns management, Phil Savage in particular, and was likely a jab in the ongoing sparring session between Winslow and Savage over the former's contract demands. It was lacking in tact, it had no place in public view, but there was a motive beyond simply griping.

By contrast, Edwards' sniveling soliloquy on Monday was so forced, fabricated and sopping wet with self-pity, it's reasonable to ask if he really meant it, or if he was just having an emotional episode in the wake of another blowout loss.

First of all, exactly what are we supposed to be appreciating about a wide receiver, a former No. 3 overall pick, who has just three touchdown catches all year? What are we supposed to say to a guy who made a bet with Olympic superhero Michael Phelps that he'd catch twice as many touchdowns as Phelps won gold medals? It's like flipping fate the bird. Phelps won eight gold medals in Beijing, if you didn't hear, and Edwards was going to be hard-pressed to equal last year's 16 touchdown catches.

With Ken Dorsey under center, it's highly unlikely that Edwards will catch another touchdown all year.

You catch the ball, we appreciate you. You become a serial pass-dropper, you make foolish, highly-publicized bets with Olympic royalty, you wonder aloud if our superstar basketball player wants to be here, then you don't get appreciated. Because, as a receiver, there is but one way to appreciate Braylon Edwards. He must receive the ball, as is described in his job title. The bet with Phelps, the snarking about LeBron, could all be overlooked if he'd catch the ball.

Second, the Michigan comment. Admittedly, Cleveland is the biggest Ohio State hotbed outside of Columbus. But there are plenty of Michigan fans in Northeast Ohio as well, and plenty of cross-pollination of college allegiances among Browns fans.

Never once have I heard a Browns fan utter "I can't stand Braylon Edwards because he went to Michigan." There are probably a few Ohio State honks out there who feel that way, but they're in the minority. If Edwards thinks he's in enemy territory wearing brown and orange on Sundays just because he wore maize and blue on Saturdays, he has a vivid imagination.

Edwards seems to have a hard time differentiating between a fan base that is upset with him over a dismal season and a fan base that hates his guts because of who he is and where he went to school. Edwards is taking his struggles, and Browns fans' collective reaction to his struggles, way too personally -- a sure sign of immaturity.

If it were up to me, I'd put this 2008 season to bed right now. Tell the Bengals and Steelers to save themselves the trips to the stadium the next two Sundays. Nothing good can come of these final two games for the Browns. And Braylon Edwards, an incredibly talented athlete who still factors into this team's future, will likely experience nothing that will contribute positively to his career or his perception of Browns fans.

Alas, that won't happen. NFL teams play 16-game seasons and Edwards will have to play out the string. But two more weeks of Edwards in the spotlight and growing increasingly frustrated with each loss means two more weeks for him to potentially pop off to the waiting cameras and microphones, further alienating himself from a fan base that has already seen way too many talented young players crumble in a Browns organization with no leadership.

Edwards will almost certainly return to the Browns in 2009, no matter how hated he feels in Cleveland. But anymore, I'm starting to wonder if his mouth, not his hands, will ultimately end his Browns career.