

In Papa Cass's latest, he comments on the Browns putting all their eggs in the basket of Charlie Frye at the quarterback position. With no backup of any worth behind Frye, if Charlie fails, Cassano argues that the Browns could be set back several years. The Browns will sink or swim with Frye this year, and his development could dictate the teams success for the foreseeable future.



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To look at him, you'd never equate Charlie Frye with an NFL franchise quarterback.

He doesn't have the broad shoulders and flowing blonde locks of John Elway. He doesn't look like David Hasselhoff in shoulder pads like Dan Marino.

Frye's skinny build, red hair and round face say "accounting firm intern"; more than "hopes of an entire city resting on his shoulders."

Yet that's exactly what Frye has to bear as he heads into his sophomore NFL season.

Selected in the third round a year ago, he was a Mid-American Conference project player. Even though the MAC has had a recent history of producing good NFL quarterbacks, some wondered if Frye had the tools to make it in the NFL. His arm was suspect, he never won a championship in college, and he desperately needed to hit the weight room.

Frye was kind of the equivalent of a "draft-and-watch" player in baseball. Select him, coach him, but make other plans. Success is not guaranteed for a player with the limited physical gifts of Frye.

So the Browns did make other plans, trading for Trent Dilfer, who was thought to be a serviceable option for the next few years. Frye could sit on the bench and be given time to ferment while the latest rebuilding process took root. If he became fine wine, the Browns would have their quarterback of the future. If Frye never progressed beyond grape juice, they'd have to burn a future draft pick on another quarterback.

But, as has been the story of the Browns in recent years, their best-laid plans were wadded up and thrown in the trash.

Dilfer was mediocre at best behind a porous offensive line. With the season lost, Frye relieved and led the Browns to several late-season wins, pushing the final record to a somewhat-respectable 6-10.

The Browns moved Frye to the top spot on the depth chart with the knowledge that Dilfer remained as a competent backup. But unlike Jon Kitna, who remained supportive after losing his starting job to Carson Palmer in Cincinnati, Dilfer wanted nothing to do with a bench role and demanded a trade.

So the Browns dumped him into the 49ers' lap for unproven career backup Ken Dorsey.

Now, as training camp commences, Frye is working without a safety net. If he struggles, the Browns are dead in the water. There is no fallback, unless a late trade or signing yields a competent veteran quarterback content to hold a clipboard and be a mentor.

As Dilfer proved, veteran quarterbacks with that level of humility are a rare breed.

Due to a series of unfortunate events, Frye has been thrust into a situation where he must succeed. If he goes down, chances are he's taking the Browns with him.

It's a lot to place on the narrow shoulders of a young quarterback less than 20 months removed from the last game of his midmajor college career.

In five seasons, the Browns never placed this kind of pressure on Tim Couch. Sure, they spewed forth rhetoric about Couch's franchise quarterback status in much the same way the Indians trumpet C.C. Sabathia as a staff ace. But franchise quarterbacks generally aren't knighted as such, they usually respond to the challenge placed upon them.

With Couch, there was usually a working backup plan. He and Kelly Holcomb were subbed for each other so many times it would make a tag-team wrestler's head spin.

The Browns have no such luxury with Frye. And for that reason, he has an opportunity to become more of a franchise quarterback than Couch could have ever hoped to have been in Cleveland.

The Browns need Frye even more than Frye needs the Browns. For a gangly kid from Willard, Ohio who grew up rooting for Bernie Kosar, it's a situation he might have never envisioned, at least quite like this.

Every boy who grows up a Browns fan dreams about being the quarterback who can slay the mighty Elway dragon and take the Browns to the Super Bowl. But for the Browns and Frye, the dream has to be a lot more fundamental, at least in 2006.

The Browns desperately need Frye to emerge from the 2006 season as a competent NFL quarterback who stayed on the field for 16 games, regardless of the final win-loss ledger.

If Frye can't meet that challenge, it could set the Browns back years.