



In this town, we love to analyze football. And we really love to analyze the Browns.

Sometimes I wonder if we, as a fan base, out-think ourselves. We're so thoroughly schooled in the nuances of the sport, in the theory of roster-building, from an early age that we sometimes forget to answer the simple questions first.

We look at the construction of the rebuilt linebacker corps, the lack of depth at wide receiver, the mostly-young secondary, the committee situation developing at running back, the Swiss Army knife that is Josh Cribbs, and we try to mash it all together into some kind of blackboard-filling calculus equation that will determine, beyond a reasonable doubt, the trajectory of the upcoming season.

But sometimes, the most basic questions are the most important. And in the case of this year's Browns, I keep coming back to two main questions that will likely determine the course of the season:

Can the roster stay mostly healthy? Can the Browns get good quarterback play?

Injuries and poor QB play have dogged the Browns since returning to the league 11 years ago. The two most successful seasons since the relaunch, 2002 and 2007, featured a relatively healthy squad and spikes in the performances of Tim Couch, Kelly Holcomb and Derek Anderson.

The seasons in which the team was on its fourth center by opening day? When Charlie Frye looked like he might not even make an Arena Football League roster? The Browns were a league doormat.

You don't need to be scientific about it. Quarterback is the most important position on the field. It's not left tackle. It's not tailback. The quarterback is the field general. Think beyond the passing game to the sum total of what is expected of a quarterback, and you'll realize that if he is bad, the offense is bad, the team doesn't score points and wins are hard to come by. End of

story.

There is a great burden on Jake Delhomme and Seneca Wallace to be not just capable passers, but the veteran offensive backbone that the Browns have lacked for most of the past decade.

Injuries are a fact of life in sports, and football and particular. On the pro level, the sport features extremely large and fast men slamming into each other at high speeds. Knees buckle, ligaments rupture, bones break. Every team has a busy medical and training staff.

You simply hope that your team's best players don't suffer serious, season-ending and career-jeopardizing injuries. The Browns haven't had a lot of luck in dodging those types of injuries.

On both fronts, there are reasons to be encouraged, however.

Delhomme is under the microscope for a woeful stretch of football that began with a playoff game in January 2009 and continued throughout the following season, when he threw eight touchdowns and 18 interceptions, paving the way for his release by the Panthers. At the very least, 35-year-old Delhomme has a great deal of incentive to prove that he's not washed up.

Behind him, Wallace's combination of arm strength and leg speed make him useful as a change-of-pace option under center, and if necessary, step in as the starting QB.

During training camp, the Browns had some fairly typical injury problems to deal with. Dave Zastudil is done for the year with a recurring knee injury. D'Qwell Jackson has his second chest muscle injury in as many years. Rookie Montario Hardesty is having knee problems, much like he did for three years in college. But so far, it's nothing that most other NFL teams aren't going through.

The Browns roster is built up to the point that there shouldn't be large-scale questions about the talent level of the team. National scribes are quick to assess the Browns roster as thin on talent. They are thin on elite talent. They don't have a lot of star power. But they do have talent in the form of young prospects and role players. A roster like this could become a team that is greater than the sum of its parts.

To succeed, this Browns team has to assume the role that so many Cleveland teams have to play -- that of the gritty, overachieving underdog. Nobody expects Cleveland to make much of a splash this year. The AFC North is a beast, with three other teams that all, rightfully, have Super Bowl aspirations. The Browns could show a great deal of improvement this year and still end up in last place with little more than a one or two-game improvement over last year's 5-11 mark. The schedule, which also includes dates with the Saints, Patriots and Jets, could simply be that difficult.

But it's also not unrealistic -- fanciful, maybe, but not unrealistic -- to envision a scenario in which the Browns show the backbone and fortitude that they so often haven't exhibited in years

past, snag a few surprise wins and end up at 10-6 or 9-7.

It does start with the tone set by Mike Holmgren in the president's chair. It has a lot to do with the personnel decisions made by Tom Heckert, and how Eric Mangini and his staff cultivate the roster handed to them by the front office. It all matters.

But if you can assume the experience of Holmgren and Heckert is bound to make the team better on a foundational level, if you can assume that Jerome Harrison will continue to be fast, Shaun Rogers will continue to be big and Josh Cribbs will continue to be a great playmaker, then there are only a few hinges upon which this season will pivot. There actually isn't a lot standing between 5-11 and typical Cleveland pessimism, and 10-6 with rampant optimism.

Can Delhomme have a bounce-back year in a new setting, and can the starters around him stay off the injured reserve list?

It could be that simple, or it could be that complicated.