Browns simply can't close in openers

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By TOM WITHERS

Associated Press

BEREA — The buildup has almost always been followed by the letdown.

The Browns' season opener, treated by Cleveland fans with the same anticipation as kids awakening on Christmas morning to wrapped packages under the holiday tree, has brought mainly misery to this football-frenzied city since the franchise returned to the NFL as an expansion team in 1999.

The Browns are just 1-13 in openers, losing 12 times at home.

Week 1? More like a weak one.

For most of the players on Cleveland's roster, the season's first game has been little more than an exercise in frustration — and failure.

Cornerback Joe Haden didn't want to label this Sunday's opener at home against the Miami Dolphins as a "must" win but it's pretty close to being one.

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"It's not a kill shot (if we lose) but we have to get over that hump," said Haden, 0-3 in openers with Cleveland. "It's not gonna be, 'Ok, let's get the next one. Let's get the next one.' We have to win this first game. I mean, not putting all the pressure on us but it's time to step up. We always talk about it but if we can't come out here and win, it's not a step forward."

Too often, an 0-1 start for the Browns has turned into 0-3 followed by a lengthy losing streak and eventually another 5-11 season. Once things begin to roll in the wrong direction, it's been nearly impossible to stop. And by the time the calendar turns to a new year, Cleveland coaches lose their jobs, players are sent packing and fans become less and less tolerant.

It's a familiar patter around here, and one the Browns need to change.

"You have to be able to win at home and win the first one," said linebacker D'Qwell Jackson, 0-6 in openers as he starts his seventh season in Cleveland. "I've been here awhile and I know in that first one, we haven't had a lot of success. We got a good opponent coming in. We think we're good but we also got to go out and play the game, we got to show we can win at home first and then obviously the division."

First things first.

Browns rookie coach Rob Chudzinski has spent the past few days downplaying the prominence of the opener. It's not that he doesn't feel it's important but like most coaches, he doesn't want to overvalue any game. They're all significant with No. 1 being as imperative to win as No. 8 or No. 16.

"This game is the most important game we're playing this week," he said. "That's the approach we've taken. We've talked to our guys all along about every segment, everything that we're doing is the most important thing at that particular time. Whether it's OTAs, minicamp, training camp, whatever the practice is, whatever the meeting is, that's the most important thing. That's the focus; that's the only way I know how to do it."

Chudzinski coached Cleveland's tight ends in 2004 when coach Butch Davis put a premium on

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winning the opener over Baltimore. The Ravens had twice embarrassed the Browns the previous year with Jamal Lewis gaining 295 and 205 yards in the wins and Baltimore outscored Cleveland 68-13.

Davis wanted payback and he got it as the Browns contained Lewis and won 20-3 — their only season-opening win in 15 years. They were 3-3 but lost nine straight and finished 4-12.

"That's the danger of putting all of your eggs in one basket," Chudzinski added. "I can't remember how many games we won that year but it wasn't a lot."

On their way to winning the Super Bowl last season, the Ravens opened with a 44-13 thrashing of Cincinnati. The win set the tone for Baltimore's year and Browns linebacker Paul Kruger said the opener can be more significant than any other game on the schedule — if it ends with a win.

"It's huge, especially in front of your home crowd," added Kruger, who signed with the Browns as a free agent in March. "To be able to come out there and have a good showing and build the confidence. It's all about creating and sustaining momentum and it's something that is going to be huge for us and so to go out there and have a win at home in the first game is a big deal."

NOTES: Browns starting right CB Buster Skrine showed up on the injury report with a shoulder injury. The Browns said he was limited in practice but the team did not provide any other details. ... Rookie LB Barkevious Mingo, still slowed by a bruised lung, took part in positional drills during the part of practice open to reporters but he did not join the other linebackers in hitting the sled or working with tackling dummies. It's still not known if the No. 6 overall pick will play Sunday but defensive coordinator Ray Horton seemed resigned that Mingo will sit. "He'll be ready to play when his body tells him to," Horton explained. "Would I like to have him out there? Yes. Am I disappointed? No because I believe we have capable players that are going to step up and play."