

Lingering Items--Adjustment Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, September 04 2012 6:35 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, September 05 2012 8:41 PM



It's going to be another long season for a city that only knows long seasons. But anyone taking a realistic assessment of the Cleveland Browns knew that already. What they don't know, what no one can answer is when the light at the end of the tunnel will not just be another oncoming train.

Certainly Mike Holmgren can't answer it nor did he much try at his press conference on Monday (itself an event but perhaps consistent with a vow to be more accessible to the local media). What he did offer up, though, spoke volumes about the season to come. It wasn't pretty.

In one breath Holmgren said he expected the team to be better but in another he expressed some astonishment at the composition of the roster and the fact that fully half is comprised of rookies and second year players and is being led by someone in only the second year of his head coaching career.

With no discernible sense of irony Holmgren also said that the team is pretty much where he thought it would be. Huh? Either Holmgren has adjusted his expectations without bothering to tell the fans or he really is as disconnected from the day to day operations as most fans have suspected.

I actually don't much care as much about the youth on this team as I do about whether the guy in charge was aware this was happening. The latter is related to the former anyway. Clearly Holmgren didn't know what was happening and that is what they call in the business a red flag. It makes every thing else he says suspect.

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Holmgren has given general manager Tom Heckert final say over the roster but perhaps sometime before the 53-man roster was announced Holmgren and Heckert should have met and discussed how this team, with all its youth and beauty, was going to meet the almost conflicting goals of significant improvement and roster overhaul in the same season. You get the feeling that Holmgren didn't realize what this team looked like until he read about it in the newspaper. Actually, that may be exactly how he found out.

And that, really, was what Monday's press conference was all about--lowering fan expectations. Holmgren reminded everyone more than once that quarterback Brandon Weeden is a fine passer but is still a rookie. He also went some length to distance himself for last year's pledge of big improvement in almost every way imaginable, probably because he knows that you can't have a rookie quarterback, a rookie running back, rookie receivers, rookie defensive linemen, no linebackers and a likely to be suspended cornerback and think you're going anywhere but down.

But more frustrating was his view on how an opening day loss (highly anticipated given how the Eagles defense toyed with the Browns' starters two weeks ago in a meaningless game) doesn't mean much because the season is a marathon and not a sprint.

In the words of Jim Steinman, "stop right there." I don't know if I'd label the NFL season a sprint but it's surely not a marathon. With only 16 games on the schedule one loss is far more impactful to a team's season than in any other sport. But that's not even the biggest problem with Holmgren's statement.

No, that would be reserved for the lack of situational awareness that it displays. The Browns 2.0 have played 13 seasons. In that time they've won their season opener once. That's right, once. In those 13 years they've had just two winning records at season's end. But let's put an even finer point on it. In those 13 seasons, there have only been 24 weeks total when Browns fans could claim that their team had a winning record. In other words, 90% of the time over the last 13 years the Browns have had a losing record. If you take away the two winning seasons of 2002 and 2007, there have only been 6 weeks in the remaining 11 years when the Browns have had a winning record. To bring it all home, there have been 7 seasons in the last 13 where the Browns didn't have a winning record at any point and 3 seasons where they enjoyed a winning record for exactly 1 week.

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So when Holmgren blithely dismisses the importance of this team in this town getting off to a good start it shows me that he has no idea just how desperate these fans are to have something positive happen with this team, if just for a little while. That's why, if nothing else, winning the home opener is so important. In context it would be contrary to the strong trend in the other direction.

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As I thought more about Holmgren's press conference it occurred to me that while he was clearly level setting rather modest expectations for the team he barely knows, the fans weren't his intended audience anyway.

Where Holmgren seemed most emphatic was with respect to his job status. Declaring he's never quit anything in his life, Holmgren clearly put the onus on owner-to-be Jimmy Haslam to push him aside and, in the grand tradition of every front office executive who's come before him in the last 13 years, pay off the remaining years of his contract.

That's the only way any of Holmgren's statements can be squared. Holmgren sounded as much like a man auditioning for his new boss as he did a man explaining to future employers that the team is on track and would get to the promised land if only he had been given the time to see it through.

In that sense Holmgren actually sounded much like Eric Mangini during the final days of The Lost Season. Mangini hadn't yet been officially told his fate from Holmgren though it seemed clear to everyone else. He sounded at times like he was lobbying for a third season while also reminding the rest of the league that his plan was working should he need a new job.

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It didn't work out for Mangini (it still hasn't) and I don't see a different outcome for Holmgren. If/when Holmgren is pushed aside, the likely outcome is that he'll retire back to Seattle with Haslam's money to live on for a few more years. And that, more than anything, will be Haslam's real welcome to the NFL. He'll join Lerner as another billionaire giving away money to guys that didn't deserve it.

Meanwhile what I hope doesn't happen but probably will is that once again the fans will be asked to be patient while the new blood cleans up the old mess. What we won't know but will be left merely to debate is whether the team was on the right track in the first place because it will once again be time to visit the one place that the fans know better than any other--square one.

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Getting now to the meat of the matter, you can't say that Holmgren doesn't know what he's talking about. He perused this roster and knows that significant improvement is unlikely.

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I don't know what to make of the Browns' rather unusual roster, except for one thing. There is simply too much youth on this team to expect improvement, substantial or otherwise, as measured by wins and losses.

Let's use the Carolina Panthers as our barometer. Last season they went 6-10 with Cam Newton as their quarterback. That was an improvement of just four games from the prior season. (True, it tripled their victory total from the year before, but they were still nowhere close to the playoffs.) That seems about right considering the caliber of player Newton is versus the kind his predecessor, Jimmy Clausen, was.

By all accounts Weeden is a better passer than Colt McCoy but the difference between Weeden and McCoy isn't even close to the difference between Newton and Clausen. So expecting a huge jump for the Browns, assuming you think the Panthers took a huge jump, just by changing quarterbacks seems a bit of wishful thinking.

If you're thinking then that the addition of Trent Richardson will make all the difference, that's doubtful, too. The 2010 Panthers were terrible but it was more anomaly than trend. The season before they were 8-8. The season before that they were 12-4. In fact at no point in their existence have they been as miserable as any of the Browns' recent seasons.

But staying with that 2010 Panthers team it's true that they didn't run the ball well that season but their same two primary running backs were far more effective in 2011 with the addition of Newton, who had a substantial rushing total of his own. Even with a very effective running game the Panthers still only improved by 4 games.

It won't take much for Richardson to markedly improve the Browns' rushing game but unless he has a record-setting season, he won't approach the combined rushing totals of the Panthers' backs last season. Add to that the fact that Weeden is almost no threat to run and you come to the rather easy conclusion that while the Browns should be more balanced like the Panthers in 2011, it still won't amount to much this year.

And, as I just mentioned, the Panthers were already a better team in 2010 than the Browns were in 2011, the records notwithstanding.

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But all of this just gets us back to the even more salient point. While upgrading at quarterback and running back, the Browns also got markedly younger almost everywhere else as well. This doesn't bode well in a league where youth is served only occasionally.

I would expect the Panthers to take another decent step forward this season because it is now more experienced. But even this season may not be of the leaps and bounds variety, the kind that Holmgren envisioned for his own team this season.

The Browns may be on the right trajectory, but as trite as it sounds only time will tell. Unfortunately there simply won't be enough time in this season to really make that judgment and that's all Haslem may give this regime before he decides to repaint the walls of Berea.

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Staying with this same theme, given what Randy Lerner extracted from Haslam for control of this franchise, have we been underestimating Randy Lerner's business acumen all along?