

## We Could Have Had It All: Cleveland '95 A Football Life

Written by {ga=tommoore}

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While watching the NFL Network's presentation of *Cleveland '95: A Football Life* on Wednesday night, we couldn't help but think that Adele's *Rolling in the Deep* would have made a perfect backdrop to the program:

*Could have had it all  
Rolling in the deep  
You had my heart inside your hand  
But you played it with a beating*

The show was actually quite good, no real surprise coming from NFL Films, and was less painful that we expected it to be. The scenes of the final home game on Dec. 17, 1995, were hard to watch, naturally, but the producers were smart to not go too in-depth into everything surrounding Art Modell's failings as an owner and all the lies he told and shenanigans he pulled to move the team – that is a story that deserves to be told on its own merits.

The show did a good job highlighting the various staff members that Bill Belichick collected in

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his five years in Cleveland and the difficult circumstances they worked under – especially that last year. The staffers did come off a bit too self-congratulatory about what a great job they did, especially for a team that was a combined 36-44 under Belichick. Yeah, we know you all worked long hours, but that doesn't mean it was an unqualified success.

The producers never really delivered, though, on the premise that the Browns would have unquestionably won a championship if the team never moved to Baltimore and Belichick would have been allowed to finish what he started.

For example, how, exactly, were the Browns going to win a Super Bowl with Eric Zeier at quarterback? In his five years as coach, Belichick went through quarterbacks like crazy as Bernie Kosar, Todd Philcox, Mike Tomczak, Brad Goebel, Vinnie Testaverde, Mark Rypien and Zeier all saw game action.

There then was the matter of drafting. For every Eric Turner (No. 1 in 1991) and Steve Everitt (No. 1 in 1993), there was a Tommy Vardell (No. 1 in '92) and Craig Powell (No. 1 in '95), plus a host of other characters that never did anything at the NFL level.

There were a few other points that stood out to us:

- Belichick threw Modell under the bus, saying the owner was in Baltimore the last half of the 1995 season, leaving the coaching staff to fend for itself. Hey, no complaints on criticizing Modell, but the producers of the show completely ignored the PR mess that Belichick himself created in the years preceding the move.
- Ozzie Newsome has probably had the most success on the NFL level (after Belichick himself) of anyone associated with the Browns staff highlighted in the show. The biggest reason for that is because Newsome took the good of what he learned but then created his own persona as a general manager, rather than just trying to be another Belichick. Doing things the Belichick way is great if you are Bill Belichick (and have Tom Brady as your quarterback), but no one else has been able to duplicate that success anywhere else in the NFL. His coaching tree has failed repeatedly, Phil Savage was a horrible general manager, things are not working out so well for Scott Pioli in Kansas City; there is really no evidence to support any other conclusion. Nick Saban has made it work on the college level and it surprises us that more of Belichick's disciples don't follow that route – Eric Mangini being a perfect example. It's not hard to see what he wants to do as a coach working at a college program.
- Speaking of Newsome, it hit us last night that, other than Modell, he is the one constant in every heartbreaking moment we had as a fan of the original Browns. He was on the field as a

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player for Red Right 88, The Drive, The Fumble and the playoff loss to the Dolphins following the 1985 season when the Browns blew a 21-3 halftime lead; and was a member of the front office when the team moved to Baltimore.

- Speaking of Mangini, it was amusing to see him in the Ravens draft room for the 1996 NFL Draft, reading the Ray Lewis selection off a cue card with multiple people hovering around him to make sure he got it right. Probably a good idea as, left to his own devices, Mangini would have drafted Alex Van Dyke or Detric Mathis instead of Lewis.

- We know Municipal Stadium was a dump but we always feel nostalgic when we see footage of the Browns playing in the old stadium. While watching the program we finally realized why – the Browns were good on the field. So if incoming owner James Haslam was watching the program, this is what we want his takeaway to be: the product on the field is infinitely more important than the “in-game experience.” Cheerleaders, fireworks, horrifically loud music, highlights on the scoreboard ... that is all secondary to the team on the field (Dan Gilbert may want to take note of that as well). Give Browns fans a good team and they will follow Haslam to the gates of hell to watch them play – trust us on that one.

- Speaking of who was and was not watching the program, the media-created nonsense about current Browns coach Pat Shurmur not watching is one of the most ridiculous things we can remember the media is this town cooking up – and that is saying a lot. Think about it: the bulk of *Cleveland '95* focused on how Belichick and the coaching staff lived and breathed Browns football 24 hours a day, working every minute to try and make the team better. So what does the media do? They criticize the current coach for choosing to work on getting the team ready for this week's game rather than watch TV? Are you serious? Talk about being pathetic and irrelevant.

So would the Browns have won a Super Bowl if they never had left? Could we really have had it all? That's the big, unanswerable question.

Modell, the only owner in the history of the NFL to ever go bankrupt with two different teams, still would not have had the money to compete – unless he sold a majority interest in the team to someone (say, Al Lerner).

And while everyone involved with the program was certain they had the team moving in the right direction, the playoff team of 1994 very well may have been the outlier season. Many want to blame the move for the team falling apart in '95, but the Browns were 4-4 (after starting out 3-1) when the news broke about the move to Baltimore; that team was already falling apart.

When you take in everything, it seems pretty unlikely that the Browns would have been able to pull it off.

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Although it is a pleasant fantasy, isn't it?