

## Haslam Buying the Browns Changes Everything. Unless It Doesn't

Written by {ga=tommoore}

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The Jimmy Haslam era as Cleveland Browns owner officially began this week with a unanimous vote by the rest of the NFL owners to approve Haslam's purchase of the team from Randy Lerner.

"It's obviously, a very exciting day for our family and I guess like a lot of families, it's one that we have dreamed about for a long, long time," [Haslam said in his first press conference as owner](#) . "What we've come to understand since Aug. 3 when we were introduced in Berea is that's it's made even more special by the fact that it's the Cleveland Browns.

"I had always heard what a great football town and football area Cleveland and Northeast Ohio is, but what we've experienced since Aug. 3 has been nothing short of phenomenal. This is truly one of the great, iconic NFL brands and if you think back to Paul Brown and of course arguably the greatest NFL player of all time, Jim Brown, it's a very special place.

"As we have said on numerous occasions we're going to do everything we possibly can and work as hard as we possibly can to bring a winning team to the fans of Cleveland whether they're in Cleveland, Northeast Ohio or one of the many Browns Backers around the country."

Haslam can certainly talk a good game, but the most important question is whether that will translate into success?

He has done an excellent job winning over the hearts and minds of the fans that have stood by

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the team through some truly unimaginable things over the past 13 years. Haslam is very PR savvy, which he revealed while talking about what is really important.

“I think we’ve been very public in Cleveland that we’ll look at everything except the helmet,” Haslam said, capturing the portion of the fan base that worries about such things. “We’re going to look at the uniforms, we’re going to look at the stadium, but listen, it’s all about putting a really good team on the field. If you have a really good team, I don’t think people care too much about your uniforms. (And he picked up the remaining fans right there.)

Haslam has also endeared himself to a Cleveland media that at times seems more interested in having someone fill their notebooks or provide sound bites than doing actual reporting (why do you think there is so much media-created “speculation” about Jon Gruden coaching the Browns?) More so than in any other town, the Cleveland media is obsessed with hearing from the owners of our various sports teams.

Haslam has shown that he gets it in regards to the media, (that goes back to the PR savvy part), but the flipside of that is he is used to dealing with public relations in a corporate setting, where companies work themselves into a frenzy protecting the brand and controlling the message. For now, Haslam is winning over the media by simply not being Randy Lerner; it will be interesting to see how quickly certain members of the media turn on him the first time he doesn’t do what an owner is “supposed” to do.

The biggest immediate change is the hiring of Joe Banner as CEO and the resulting phase out of Mike Holmgren.

“Our goal is to put together an organization that will be the best at everything we do, whether it’s our work in the community, whether it’s the business that we do and most importantly, what we do on the field in our goal to win championships,” [said Banner](#), who spent 19 years with the Philadelphia Eagles. “The key differentiator of the teams in the NFL starts with the ownership and the ownership having the right goals and right agenda in both doing and supporting, hiring the right people to implement their vision and their goals, creating the right priorities.”

Having worked for so many years in the NFC East means Banner has an understanding of what the Browns face by playing in the AFC North, aka the NFL’s Group of Death.

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“Our goal is to win a Super Bowl,” Banner said. “I think we shoot to build the best team in the NFL. If you’re doing that, it will follow that you’ll win your division. I don’t underestimate the other teams in the division. They’re all run by good, smart people. They’ve all got young quarterbacks. They’ve got smart general managers and player personnel people, so we’ll have to build a very good team to be strong in this division.”

As for Holmgren, the NFL is a big-boy league where you are judged on your wins and losses. By that measure, Holmgren’s tenure was a failure (no playoff tickets for you!), but the final chapter has yet to be written. If the Browns get this thing turned around in a few years with a core that includes Brandon Weeden, Trent Richardson, Phil Taylor, Jabaal Sheard and the rest of the players acquired by general manager Tom Heckert, then Holmgren will deserve a small part of the credit as he was the one who brought Heckert to town.

The biggest decision that Haslam will have to make as owner is still looming – what to do about the head coach? Rather than appease the hoop heads by firing Pat Shurmur as soon as Haslam walked out of the owner’s meeting in Chicago, he will take his time and not make a decision until after the season.

“I would never stand up here and say we have to have x amount of wins or whatever. I think you want to see a positive direction,” Haslam said. “I think you want to see continued improvement. You want to see them play hard, and if you’ve seen our team, we’ve played hard every game.

“These men are big boys. They understand the profession they’re in. They’ve been through it before. (Pat) knows what he has to do. I’ve said all along, we don’t want to be a distraction. I’ve told Pat, that if there’s anything we can do let us know, otherwise you go out and coach the football team, get the guys ready to play hard. Let’s win as many games as we can.”

While taking a wait-and-see approach to the head coach is a sound strategy – especially in a town where firing the coach/manager happens way too frequently – that patient approach has to come with one caveat: Haslam and Banner have to look at the entire body of work that Shurmur has put up, not just a small sample of games at the end of the season.

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Think back to 2009. "Super coach" Eric Mangini was quite possibly going to be a one-and-done coach when the Browns were sitting at 1-11. But the Browns built a four-game winning streak the included the most over-rated win in franchise history, plus wins against Kansas City, Oakland and Jacksonville, which were a combined 18-32 that season.

Of course when the Browns started the 2010 season at 1-5, the winning streak was exposed for the mirage that it was.

Haslam simply can't afford to make that same mistake with Shurmur. The Browns should show improvement during the second half of the season, but the big question is going to be why. Is the improvement the result of coaching? Or the fact that a team loaded with first- and second-year players is exhibiting a natural progression as they learn what it takes to play in the NFL?

The answer to that question – and Haslam and Banner must get the answer right – will go a long way toward determining if things are really going to change with the team or not.

"We're going to look for people that are very hard working, high character," Banner said. "Some people are intimidated by big goals. If somebody's worried that our goal is to win Super Bowls, ... that's not going to be the right person. They're not going to fit in. If their vision is the same as ours, we're talking about the importance of hiring good people. We want to have a head coach that understands the importance of putting together a great staff. You have a general manager, you want him to have a staff of great scouts. That's just going to be kind of the mantra of the organization."

It all sounds great until they start playing the games, players start getting injured or suspended, draft boards get messed up and everything else than can derail the best laid plans in the NFL.

But business as usual hasn't been working for the Browns for a long time and Haslam and Banner represent change that Browns fans can believe in. Maybe the biggest contribution they make is that, by purchasing the team from Lerner, Haslam has cut the final remaining tie to the old Browns.

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With no one left in the organization to remind fans of the sordid details of the original Browns' move to Baltimore, things may finally start to change for the better.

But if Haslam and Banner can't back up their talk, well, we'll always have their introductory press conference where, for one day, anything seemed possible for the Browns.

*(Photo courtesy of ClevelandBrowns.com)*