

Staying The Course

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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In a press conference earlier today, Browns General Manager Phil Savage gave Romeo Crennel the dreaded vote of confidence, vowing that the team would stay the course with it's current leadership. Gary Benz knows that this won't be popular with the fan base, and suggests the fans are probably right on this one.



When we called for Browns head coach, Romeo Crennel, to be axed, we noted that the most likely scenario, unfortunately, was that the Browns would favor theoretical stability and continuity over doing the right thing. That was on full display today as General Manager Phil Savage, channeling his best George W. Bush, downplayed any problems or turmoil in Berea and proclaimed that we'll stay the course.

We're certain that the Savage press conference won't go over well with most fans. But rather than simply knee-jerk a reaction, let's breakdown his major theme: stability.

Savage invoked several examples of stability or lack thereof to make his point. He said that Frank Beamer, the head coach at Virginia Tech, was nearly fired after his first two seasons. By being patient, Virginia Tech has supposedly gone on to become a top college program because it practiced patience when it wasn't popular.

Savage invoked his former employer, the Baltimore Ravens. He noted that a year ago people were calling for Brian Billick's oversized head. But the Ravens stuck with Billick and now look at 'em, will ya?

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Savage invoked the Pittsburgh Steelers and Bill Cowher, presumably for the purpose of demonstrating that good things can happen when you keep a good coach in place for a long period of time.

Although the examples are hardly comparable to what is fast becoming a Superfund waste site in Berea, we'll except Savage's premise if he accepts ours: you have to have the right person in place in the first instance.

When Beamer was hired by Virginia Tech, he had already had extensive head coaching experience and had been fairly successful in the process. We'll give Savage the benefit of the doubt for having a better memory than us because we don't recall any great hue and cry to replace Beamer early in his tenure. But assuming that such did exist, at least Virginia Tech had some track record to look back to for counseling such patience. The only track record Savage has with respect to Crennel is his work as an assistant. To this day Crennel has yet to prove he can make the transition from lifelong assistant to head coach and nothing in his background even speaks to that issue. Toss aside the Beamer comparison.

Regarding the world's best offensive mind, just ask him, Brian Billick, at least he has a Super Bowl ring. Until they start playing the Super Bowl three or four times a year, there will be a finite number of coaches who have climbed that mountain. More to the point, what Savage forgets is that Billick was not hired by current Ravens owner Steve Biscotti in the first place. There's always a tendency for the owner to want his own guy in place. The fact that Biscotti gave Billick the benefit of the doubt after last year's Ravens meltdown while simultaneously putting Billick on a short leash. Crennel may have been a top assistant with a Super Bowl ring, but he didn't win it as the man in charge so the situation is hardly comparable.

But the Billick comparison is useful if only to point out the differences. As we noted Biscotti put Billick on a short leash this year, meaning win or else. When Billick saw his offense struggling under offensive coordinator Jim Fassel, Billick moved quickly and canned his good friend. Crennel, under no similar urgency or threat, allowed the offense to founder under overmatched and underqualified offensive coordinator Maurice Carthon. It wasn't until the players essentially threatened to personally buy Carthon a one-way ticket to the Arena League that Crennel took action. Thus, the better thought is to toss aside the Billick comparison. But if you must use it, then see it for how poorly Savage and the Browns fare in relation.

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Let's pause for a moment on the last example, Bill Cowher. To my knowledge, Cowher's job has never been in jeopardy, even once. This despite the fact that until last season Cowher's career was essentially a mirror of his former coach, Marty Schottenheimer. He knows how to make and keep a team competitive, he just couldn't push it over the top. Only various meltdowns, including the career-threatening miss by former Colts and Cowboys kicker Mike Vanderjagt, allowed the Steelers to win their first Super Bowl in 26 years. But Cowher didn't experience his first losing season until 7 full years into his 15-year career. While that losing season was followed by another, he at least had an impressive track record as a head coach on which to inform any decision regarding his future. Crennel, again, has no such track record so toss aside the Cowher example as well.

Usually the vote of confidence by the general manager or owner is the kiss of death. More often than not, a firing is often only days away. But in this case we think Savage is sincere, which is too bad. Savage went ahead in his press conference and cited the usual litany of reasons the Browns haven't met expectations, such as injuries and the like. But every team suffers injuries so to our ears this sounded like so much more excuse making.

In our view, the measure of a person is not necessarily defined by the mistakes he makes but by how he responds to those mistakes. With Crennel, that's all we really have to go on and that's where he consistently falls short. He looked weak and impotent in dealing with Carthon's repeated failures. He's proven that he can't control strong personalities like Kellen Winslow, Jr. and especially Braylon Edwards. No matter what he's telling them "internally", they still pop off, throw other coaches and players under the bus, and generally play the kind of undisciplined football that will keep sustained success elusive.

We understand that you can't let transient emotions of the fans be the sole basis for making any team decisions. But neither can you ignore their feelings entirely. Savage and owner Randy Lerner are calculating that their own gut feelings, unjustified by any objective evidence, are correct. In doing so, hopefully they've taken into account that they stand on the precipice of alienating a dwindling base with their head-in-the-sand approach to management of their civic asset.