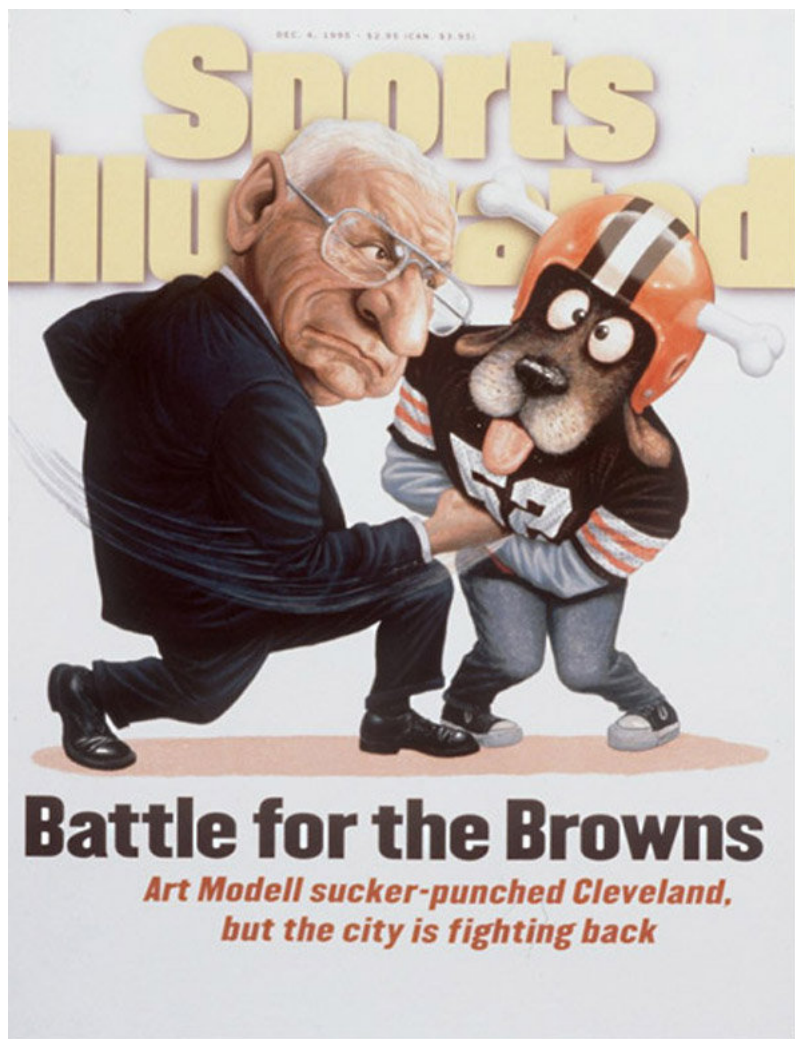


Art Modell Does Not Belong in the Hall of Fame

Written by {ga=tommoore}

Thursday, January 24 2013 4:00 PM - Last Updated Thursday, January 24 2013 6:34 PM



On Feb. 2, the 46-member selection committee for the Pro Football Hall of Fame will meet to vote on this year's class of inductees.

And there is a chance that the unthinkable may happen when the group gets together in New Orleans – they may actually vote Art Modell into the Hall of Fame.

Modell falls under the category of “contributor” and, if elected, will join 19 other men in that category, among them George Halas, Lamar Hunt, Art and Dan Rooney, Curly Lambeau, Pete Rozelle and Ed Sabol.

According to the [hall's website](#), the selection committee is “charged with the vital task of continuing to be sure that new enshrines are the finest the game has produced.”

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In no way does that describe Modell and, if the selection committee ignores how he stole the Browns from Cleveland and votes him in, the Hall of Fame would be better off shutting its doors forever.

There are those who believe that Cleveland fans should “get over its bitterness” about Modell’s actions, [most notably Leonard Shapiro](#) , formerly of *The Washington Post*, who decided it was his responsibility to tell Browns fans how to act [following the passing of Modell in September](#)

:

Just about everywhere around the NFL on Sunday and Monday night, they paid respects in some form to Art Modell, who died last week after an illustrious career that spanned six decades as a team owner and major mover and shaker in the league he loved.

Everywhere except Cleveland, an unforgiving city that reviled him in life and apparently in death as well.

Never mind Modell’s myriad charitable and civic contributions to the city, that championship season in 1964, fabulous players on his watch like Jim Brown and Bobby Mitchell, all those playoff teams in the 1980s and early ‘90s in a town the Brooklyn-born Modell considered his true home.

Yes, let’s all forget about Modell moving the team because of his own incompetence; instead let’s remember him for one lone championship in 35 years of owning the Browns.

Let’s remember him for Jim Brown, who retired because Modell wouldn’t let him report a few days late to training camp in 1966, a year after Brown was named the NFL’s MVP after posting the second-highest rushing total in his career.

Let’s remember him for Bobby Mitchell, a Hall of Famer who Modell traded away so he could

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draft Ernie Davis and create a PR backfield of former Syracuse standouts.

While we're at it, let's also remember Modell for trading away Paul Warfield, a Hall of Fame wide receiver, so the Browns could draft quarterback Mike Phipps. After drafting Phipps, Modell realized that his rookie quarterback needed someone to throw the ball to, so he traded defensive lineman Jim Kanicki, running back Ron Johnson and linebacker Wayne Meylan to the New York Giants for receiver Homer Jones, who lasted one year with the Browns, catching 10 passes for 141 yards.

Why not remember Modell for firing Paul Brown, only one of the greatest coaches in NFL history and a Hall of Famer himself (has any one owner moved more Hall of Famers off his team than Modell?) Can we also remember that, starting in 1971, Modell went through six full-time head coaches in 24 years searching for the next Paul Brown?

Or is that not convenient?

Maybe we should forgive Modell the same way that Baltimore fans have forgiven Robert Irsay for moving the Colts to Indianapolis. Oh wait, [they haven't forgiven him](#) .

Here is what the [Hall of Fame has listed on its website as Modell's credentials](#) :

Modell is the only elected NFL President in league history, serving in that capacity from 1967 through 1969. He served on the AFL-NFL Merger Committee and broke the impasse for realignment when he agreed to move the Browns into the AFC. He also chaired the NFL's Labor Committee, which in 1968 successfully negotiated the league's first collective bargaining agreement with the players. He is most noted, however, for his tenure as the NFL's Broadcast Committee Chairman. The contracts he negotiated over a 31-year period (1962-1993) set the standard for sports TV. He was also an important participant in the negotiations with ABC to start Monday Night Football.

All nice, but does that make Modell one of the finest the game has produced? Modell's credentials seem pretty soft, especially compared to the other contributors who have already

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been enshrined.

George Halas, for example, coached the Chicago Bears for 40 seasons and won six NFL titles. His 324 coaching wins was a league record for almost 30 years. He represented the Bears, known then as the Decatur Staleys, at the meeting in Canton where the NFL was born.

Lamar Hunt was another trailblazer as one of the founding members of the American Football League. He was also influential in bringing about the merger between the two leagues.

Pete Rozelle was NFL Commissioner for 30 years and he negotiated the first league-wide NFL television contract in 1962 (and we suspect was highly involved throughout his tenure, despite Modell “setting the standard.”)

Well, you get the picture.

Shapiro isn't the first person to fall under the spell of Modell, who was always a better salesman than owner. But no matter how much Modell's supporters want to rewrite history (and their attempts would make a Cold War Soviet-era propaganda minister blush), you simply can't just look at the “good” Modell without also taking a very hard look at his decision to move the Browns.

Even if you take the [emotional aspect out of the equation](#) , and just look at the facts, it is easy to see that Modell's candidacy is nothing but a sham. (Thanks to Jim Kanicki for some of these facts; [once you done here you really need to go read his thoughts on Modell's candidacy](#) for the Hall of Fame as he goes into more detail of some of Modell's “accomplishments.”)

Modell owned the Browns during a time when they were one of the biggest brands in American sports – before people even knew what a brand was. But somehow, some way, he was the lone owner in the NFL who could not make money in the sport.

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Modell was among a group of investors who bought the Browns for \$4 million in 1961 (Modell pitched in \$250,000 of his own money). By the time he finished selling the franchise in 2003, [the investment had increased by about 2,300 percent](#). But somehow he couldn't make it work financially.

Modell helped the NFL sign a national TV deal with CBS in 1964 that netted the league \$14.6 million a year. In 1965, the AFL signed a deal with NBC for \$36 million a year. So a five-year-old league with teams in media markets like Buffalo, Kansas City and San Diego were able to get a better TV deal than the established NFL with teams in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. (We're sure that is a standard Modell's fellow owners wish he had not set).

Modell took over the operation of Cleveland Municipal Stadium from the city in 1973 when he formed the Stadium Corp. He guaranteed the city a guaranteed rental fee each year along with an agreement that allowed the city to share in the gross rentals from all events held at the stadium. Modell also committed to spend \$10 million on improvements.

Essentially, Modell guaranteed that his Stadium Corp. have all the risk, eventually pushing him (and by extension the Browns) into a deep financial hole that he could never get out of.

From 1986 through 1995 (the team's last season in Cleveland), the Browns averaged more than 70,000 fans for their home games. Local TV ratings were also among the highest in the league, with the Browns finishing second (to the Dallas Cowboys) in 1993 and first in the league in 1994.

Despite what should have been a cash cow with the Cleveland Browns, Modell had to go to multiple banks to borrow the money to pay the signing bonus of wide receiver Andre Rison. (A signing that coach Bill Belichick and front office executive Mike Lombardi certainly endorsed. Lombardi is one of the NFL's top talent evaluators? Says who? Says who?)

But somehow Modell couldn't make it work.

When all the excuses and money had finally run out in Cleveland, Modell turned to Baltimore, a

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market he had held in his back pocket since 1991. At that time, the NFL was looking to expand and had lined up Robert Tisch as owner of a Baltimore expansion franchise.

But [Modell talked Tisch into buying into the New York Giants instead](#) and then went on to vote for Jacksonville over Baltimore for an expansion team.

Baltimore and the state of Maryland gave Modell the sweetest of sweetheart deals: the state would pay for a new stadium that the team would use rent free; the team would keep all profits from parking, concessions, tickets, skyboxes and advertising, and the team could sell up to \$80 million in Personal Seat Licenses.

However, that \$80 million (or at least a very large part of it) was already spent even before Modell cashed the check. According to Michael Poplar's book, *Fumble! The Browns, Modell and the Move*, at least \$70 million of that went to:

- The other 29 NFL owners for agreeing to the move (\$1 million per team)
- More than \$11 million to the city of Cleveland to buyout the last three years of the team's lease at Municipal Stadium
- Almost \$15 in unpaid Stadium Corp. loans to various banks in Cleveland
- Probably another \$15 million to cover the team's legal fees, pay off the facility in Berea and various moving expenses.

Does that sound like someone who should be in the Hall of Fame?

Despite everything, Modell squandered the new opportunity and ended up having to sell the team anyway, agreeing to a deal in 1999 with Stephen Bisciotti that would have Bisciotti take total control of the franchise by 2004.

When the end came in Cleveland, Modell famously claimed "I had no choice," forgetting that, in life, there are always choices.

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It was all so simple and the story did not have to end the way it did, with Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening grinning like the village idiot and waving a Browns mug in a Baltimore parking lot at the press conference announcing the Browns were leaving Cleveland.

If Modell had just handed the keys to the franchise to Al Lerner, rather than get on Lerner's private plane, everything would have turned out differently. Modell would have been able to play the elder statesman and the man who secured that the Browns would always remain in Cleveland.

Just imagine the scene if Modell would have hoisted the Vince Lombardi Trophy in 2001 as Orange and Brown confetti fell from the sky. Forget a bust in Canton, there would be a statue of Modell outside of the stadium in downtown Cleveland.

Modell may have believed he did not have a choice, but the Hall of Fame selection committee does have one and it really is a simple choice.

The Hall of Fame is no place for Art Modell.