



Joe Banner. You just don't like the guy.

Maybe it's his demeanor. He just seems abrasive and blunt when he appears in front of the media. Maybe it's his hardball management style. When he took over as CEO of the Browns, he made it clear from the outset that the organization would be run his way, with his judgment final, and if you don't like it, go suck an egg.

Maybe he lost you when he brought former Browns executive Mike Lombardi back to town, to reign as the top football executive in the organization. Or maybe it's because, despite your reservations about Lombardi, he actually isn't the top football guy. Banner is, because he reserves veto power over all decisions, including who gets signed and who gets drafted.

Maybe you chalk that up to Banner having a massive Napoleon complex, eager to bask in the glow of his own organization-building awesomeness.

Or maybe you just don't like the fact that Banner looks like every school principal who wrote you a detention slip during your formative years. With his narrowed eyes, perpetual sneer and craggy complexion, he looks kind of like an angrier, more spiteful version of comedian Lewis Black – without the comedy.

You don't like Joe Banner. But you might learn to like him, or at least accept him, in a crisis-alliance sort of way. Because Banner, with his absolute leadership style, is the one person standing between the Browns organization and the tempest surrounding Jimmy Haslam and Pilot Flying J.

Remember the many valleys and sinkholes of the Randy Lerner years (How could you forget)? Remember how we all wanted a more involved owner? Someone who would pace the sidelines like Jerry Jones in Dallas? Someone who wouldn't be afraid to get his hands dirty running the organization, to shake things up when complacency set in and the losses piled up?

Now, you don't want any part of a more-involved owner. As Haslam continues in his seemingly-futile effort to furiously scrub the scandal-stains off his company, you don't want him and his federal-investigation circus anywhere near the delicate sapling that is the rebooted Browns organization.

Thus far, Haslam has been able to deny any involvement in his company's alleged rebate fraud activities. He has denounced the reported criminal activities as the actions of a few bad apples in Pilot's sales department, who are now ex-employees. But as investigators continue to get persons of interest to cooperate with the investigation in the name of punitive leniency, there remains the distinct possibility that the fingers will point all the way to the top.

If Haslam is directly connected to the criminal activity, either through knowledge or action, and subsequently indicted on federal charges, you most definitely do not want him anywhere near the Browns.

Of course, if that happens, that might be right about the time the NFL steps in and seizes control of the Browns, if Haslam hasn't sold the team beforehand. But that's another discussion topic.

Haslam is too much of a lightning rod to make more than the occasional on-field cameo appearance. He does not belong in front of the microphones in the capacity of Browns owner right now. If Haslam can emerge from the scandal unindicted, not in prison and with his

company intact, that might be the time for him to resume rebuilding his profile as Browns owner. And those are a lot of very iffy “ifs.”

For now, Cleveland being the bizarro-sports town it is, we want Haslam to act the part of Randy Lerner, the most shriveled of shrinking violets. We don't want there to be a reason for him to expand his involvement in the Browns organization at the moment. We want him, and his scandal, to stay firmly planted in Tennessee.

Banner, for all the reasons you'd cast him as a villain in any movie, is the guy who can keep Haslam away. You might not like his steel grip on the organizational throttle, his need to be in control at all times or his brusque demeanor. But those qualities are also useful for maintaining order and enforcing standards, both of which are critical to building a well-run organization, and subsequently a team that can take the field and win.

If Banner keeps the organization organized, clearly defines roles, demands excellence and either shapes up or ships out those who aren't performing up to snuff, Haslam doesn't need to set foot in the Browns complex in Berea, save for the occasional status check-ins. And that's a best-case scenario right now.

Like it or not, Banner is rapidly becoming a very pivotal figure in Berea. Haslam owns the legal property that is the Cleveland Browns, but this is Banner's organization, Banner's team. And Banner has to own it, grow it and protect it. Unfortunately, that means protecting it from the owner himself at the moment.

After an acrimonious departure from the Eagles organization, which included a falling out with Eagles owner and one-time best buddy Jeff Lurie, Banner came to Cleveland to prove he could build a winning football organization himself. Of course, every new figurehead who has walked through the doors in Berea over the past 14 years has wanted to prove that. But for Banner, the stakes are now higher than what he signed on for.

There really doesn't seem to be an in-between for Banner anymore. He's either going to go down in history as a failure, another chewed-up, spat-out victim of the Cleveland curse, or as one of the great executives the Browns have ever had.

Either he's going to successfully protect the Browns from the trials and tribulations of an embattled owner, while building the type of organization the Browns haven't had since the late 1980s, or he's not, in which case the Browns could very well end up as collateral damage in the instability wrought by the Pilot scandal, and Banner's tenure will go into the history books as another Browns disaster.

You might not like Joe Banner, but you're relying on him now. He has the future of your football team in his hands.