

Lingering Items--Questionable Characters Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, August 03 2013 1:00 PM - Last Updated Saturday, August 03 2013 9:02 AM



The Cleveland Browns' Josh Gordon has all the attributes that define the modern day wide receiver. His work ethic is questionable, his decision making is awful and he has a massive ego that stretches well beyond his modest achievements.

Maybe general manager Mike Lombardi was right all along. Gordon was a waste of a second round pick. In doing that former general manager Tom Heckert was just continuing a well established core competency of the Browns and wasted second round picks. But that's another story for another day.

What surprises about the Gordon story though is how thin of a thread he's hanging from considering it's only his second year in the league. Already he's run afoul of the league's substance abuse policy several times and now must sit out the first two games of the season. For that kind of production the Browns could have kept Brian Robiskie.

Gordon's latest transgression involves, by his account, a positive test for codeine that he didn't know was contained in a prescription cough syrup. To this point no one locally has challenged Gordon's story and thus fans are under the misimpression that Gordon was just an unwitting victim. Doubtful.

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Had anyone in the local media bothered to check, the NFL's drug policy does have a "therapeutic use" exemption. In other words, testing positive for a banned substance contained in a prescription doesn't trigger a violation of league policy. There is one huge caveat and that is undoubtedly what tripped up Gordon. For the exemption to apply the player has to report the prescription to the league's medical advisor in advance. A player can't wait to see if he passes the test and then having failed claim he was under a prescription.

Taking Gordon's word that he tested positive for codeine it's also clear that either he had no legitimate prescription in the first place or he tried to get one after the fact. He certainly didn't report it in advance. In other words, Gordon's story is just that, a story.

What's more likely, though we won't know for sure unless Gordon fesses up, is that he was drinking "purple drank" or whatever else the mixture of cough syrup and soda is referred to locally. It's a cheap high and very common. Given his several run ins with marijuana, the image of Gordon finding another way to get high while avoiding his prior drug of choice seems a far more plausible version of how he got tripped up than the rather generic excuse he's using now. My guess, though purely a guess, is that Gordon was partaking in his version of "purple drank" and simply didn't know that the cough syrup he used to make it contained codeine. That wouldn't make him an unwitting victim. More like a deliberate fool. At least Joe Haden didn't claim he didn't know Adderall was a banned substance.

Young players, like young people, do dumb things. But Gordon has more of a history. When the Browns drafted him he had already failed three drug tests because of his marijuana use. That's not a guy that's simply dumb. That's a guy with a problem. Add in the recent failed test for another drug intended to induce a high and the pattern is more than established.

To this point in his young life Gordon has demonstrated that getting high trumps his obligations to the Browns and the league and he may find himself out of football soon serving that higher master. Meanwhile Gordon repays the dwindling faith the team has in him by essentially dogging it at practice. He's claiming an injury but in terms of football injuries tendinitis is among the mildest. If nothing else, Gordon is a guy that needs practice.

Gordon's days in the NFL are numbered and at the moment he seems to be the only one that hasn't noticed. He deserves to have his career dangle like a rain drop from a downspout. If the Browns aren't making other plans, they should be. Fortunately Gordon won't be hard to replace. Terrell Owens and Chad Johnson are looking for work.

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Speaking of Lombardi, he is becoming chattier lately, buoyed undoubtedly by the heap of praise that club president Joe Banner heaped on him recently.

I'm glad he's talking. I'm not sure it's a good idea. But what he does say provides interesting insight if you bother to follow the dots.

Speaking about the aforementioned Gordon, Lombardi went out of his way to praise his progress even as Gordon sat with an injury that was anything but. Lombardi told the media the other day (as reported in what passes as The Plain Dealer these days) that Gordon showed a great attitude in the offseason and wants to be a great player and that he (Lombardi) is excited to be a part of that.

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Given Gordon's fourth failed drug test (at least) and the fact that the most recent was in the off season, one wonders what Lombardi would say if Gordon had actually done his team and teammates a real favor and stayed clean and worked hard, you know like Gordon said he would when it was discovered that he initially lied about not testing positive for marijuana at Utah where he went after flaming out at Baylor.

Meanwhile, when it comes to quarterback Brandon Weeden, Lombardi had trouble expressing anything other than his lackluster support for the team's putative starter.

Try to find the compliment in this quote from Lombardi: "I think (Weeden) clearly has proven in the off-season that he's gotten better at everything they've asked him to do. So, every day is about getting better and I think that's what a lot of players are doing." It's tantamount to saying that your teenager is getting better at the things you ask him to do, like taking out the trash. Now instead of having to ask him four times to do it he now takes it out after the second request.

Lombardi was a bit more complimentary of the two quarterbacks on the roster he had a hand in acquiring, Brian Hoyer and Jason Campbell, but the stronger impression that Lombardi left was that quarterback is still an unsettled position. On the Richter scale that runs from wasted second round picks to wasted quarterback picks, this revelation hardly moves the needle even a fraction.

But let's be fair to Lombardi and not assume that his indifferent attitude toward Weeden is just a case of "he's not my guy"ism. Weeden was an ill advised pick because drafting a 29 year old rookie only works in a Disney film.

I'd expect Weeden to be better this year than last when he was one of the worst quarterbacks in the league. There's nowhere else to go but up. But the up has to be significant and soon or he'll just be another Derek Anderson, except without the one good year.

Quarterback is the hardest position to play in sports and patience makes sense, except in the case of 30-year old sophomores. The Browns simply don't have four years to spend hoping that Weeden figures out the game. And even if they did by then it would be time to groom his replacement anyway.

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Another intriguing statement from Lombardi emanated from a discussion about rookie defensive end Barkevious Mingo. Lombardi said he's unconcerned that Mingo may not crack the starting lineup. After all, he said, it's not who gets introduced as the starter (though he allowed that this is important in and of itself) but how much playing time a player gets. How true.

Lombardi then allowed that he wouldn't be disappointed if no rookie cracks the starting lineup because, again, it's ultimately about playing time.

That too is as true as far as it goes but let's face it. If none of Lombardi's draft choices start then that will be a problem. Not to put too fine a point on it but last season's team was awful. It's the reason a new regime is in place again. It had three, maybe four solid starters, guys who could start for any team. Two of them were let go in free agency. Another is at left tackle. Another at linebacker. In other words this wasn't a playoff team filled with established incumbents. If no rookie starts then how or why can fans expect anything more than another frustrating season?

For now I'll give Lombardi the benefit of the doubt that he's just being cautious and diplomatic and not hedging his bets, though that's exactly what it sounded like.

I'm not in the camp that thinks Lombardi is the devil because he was here once before with Bill Belichick and they did some unpopular things. Banner is a good executive with a good track record and his judgment on Lombardi deserves to be respected. That's why I'm unconcerned at the moment. Banner is also a brutal bottom line guy. If Lombardi's draft class is a washout fans won't need to worry about running him out of town. Banner will do it for them.

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At the moment the Browns kicking situation is one of the most unsettled areas of the team and yet is getting little notice at the moment. This week's question to ponder: What's the over and under in minutes in the first preseason game when Banner and Lombardi slap their palms to their head and wonder what they were thinking when they didn't try to re-sign Phil Dawson?