

The Numbing Sameness of it All, Again--Trade Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, September 19 2013 8:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, September 19 2013 8:35 AM



You get the sense from listening to Cleveland Browns president Joe Banner that this year's regular season is just one big inconvenience. Banner hasn't liked the make up of this team since he arrived and those pesky games, like this week's against Minnesota, keep getting in the way of his grand scheme to remake the team in his own crabby image.

Banner said that the first time he talked to the Indianapolis Colts about Trent Richardson was on Tuesday. But when he pressed whether Mikey called Jimmy or Jimmy called Mikey he deliberately avoided answering. He might as well have just admitted it. General Manager Mike Lombardi saw that the Colts needed a running back and made the call. That the Colts bit in the manner they did probably shocked Lombardi even more than the day Banner reached across the table to Lombardi, hand extended, and said "you're hired."

But let's be honest about a few things. Neither Banner, Lombardi, Rob Chudzinski nor Norv Turner much liked Richardson. He was traded because he had more value at the moment than the player they like even less, Brandon Weeden.

It's not like the Browns' record this season hinges appreciably on whether Richardson or even Weeden is on the roster. This is a deeply flawed team that had at best only a realistic shot at a handful of wins even before Richardson was traded and Weeden banged his thumb.

To understand this trade it's best to remember that the only place where it really matters whether you won four games or two is when establishing next year's draft order. Banner wanted to enhance his chances of getting next year's very first pick and this trade, coupled with Weeden's injury, presented a particularly enticing hedge. Either the Browns get it through

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straight out incompetence, the most likely path, or through a package of picks. That's what Banner and Lombardi are betting on. It's a suckers bet.

Where did it all turn bad for Richardson in Cleveland? Probably about the time new owner Jimmy Haslam hired Joe Banner to be the club's president. Banner has some very specific ideas on where players should or shouldn't be drafted and what they should or shouldn't be paid. It's why Phil Dawson is gone, for example. There isn't a chance in hell that Banner would have drafted Richardson with the fourth pick in last year's draft and if possible even less of a chance he'd have traded three picks to move up one spot to draft him third.

I can only imagine the assessment that Banner must have given Haslam about last year's draft and the boneheaded move the incredibly incapable Mike Holmgren made to gut the draft to get Richardson. And that was before Banner gave Haslam an earful about the abject stupidity that is drafting a 29 year old rookie quarterback.

But if there was a linchpin to the urgency of moving Richardson it probably came during the team's first drive against the Ravens last Sunday. Weeden had just hit tight end Jordan Cameron for a 53-yard gain that put the ball at the Ravens' 7 yard line. That's the point at which you give it to your number one running back, the third pick in last year's draft and let him show what he's made of. Chud and Turd did just that, giving Richardson two shots at the end zone. He gained three yards on the first and one on the next. Weeden then through ineffectively to Davone Bess on third down before settling for the Billy Cundiff field goal.

Richardson's career in Cleveland was over right then. The inability to score at that moment likely convinced Banner and Lombardi that Richardson lacked the strength or explosiveness to grind out 7 yards against a Ravens defense that is a shadow of its Super Bowl self. It's hard to argue the point.

One of the bigger surprises, at least to me, has been the fan reaction. My sense is that it's not so much that the fans were wholly vested in Richardson. It's that the trade gave them a hook on which to hang their building anger at a franchise that has abused them for over a decade.

Banner is right that he has to earn the fan's trust and given his nature is certainly comfortable with waiting the 12+ months, at least, that it will take before any aspect of this trade can be

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objectively analyzed. What Banner doesn't quite get yet is that the fans don't have that same comfort. While Banner was in Philadelphia, the fans here were buying Courtney Brown and Tim Couch jerseys.

The fans intellectually understand the Browns' thinking behind the trade. What they don't understand is why this franchise keeps taking a dump in their punchbowls the minute they set it out for the party. Fans have barely had time to build their hopes for a season that was bound to collapse anyway. Raising the white flag so early in the season in such an unmistakable way is just unsettling. They really wanted their 1-5 start before settling into several months of real bitching. It's the arc and rhythm of every Browns season and to have it disturb this quickly messes with one's equilibrium.

You have to admire Banner's stones in taking the heat at Wednesday night's press conference just as you have to admire his stony willingness to be very nonspecific about how this trade will make the Browns better. After all, there's still the little matter of using the pick effectively. We know that the Browns 2.0 have whiffed on every first round pick except Joe Thomas. With that kind of history there's no reason for the fans to believe, let alone believe with certainty, that this trade will in fact make the Browns better.

On the other hand, it doesn't make them worse. They've scored one meaningless touchdown this season with Richardson on the roster. The only thing this does, really, is mostly close the books on what was an awful draft class. They'll be completely closed when Weeden is gone, which he too most assuredly is.

Lost in the shuffle of yesterday's trade was the earlier press conference on Wednesday when Chud announced that Brian Hoyer would be this week's starter. Chud was asked whether Weeden will return to the lineup as the starter once he's healthy. Chud danced around it like Banner dancing around who called whom, refusing to make that commitment despite numerous opportunities to do so. If Weeden does return as a starter it's because Hoyer craps his pants as a starter or gets injured. Weeden will find himself in the offseason competing with the likes of Colt McCoy for a backup gig somewhere.

If you're looking for the real head scratcher in this deal, ask yourself why Indianapolis was willing to give up a first round pick for anyone. That kind of trade doesn't happen in the NFL. The Colts' Jim Irsay never got past Richardson's pedigree when evaluating the trade. I can't think of running back in the entire league I'd give up a first round pick for so yea, while we're at

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it, let's give Lombardi some credit for lacking the shame it must have taken to even ask the Colts for a first round pick. He probably had to get their confirmation in writing when the Colts jumped because hearing them say "yes" had to convince Lombardi that his hearing must be failing.

If there's a real loser in this trade it's probably Chud. Irrespective of the underlying circumstances, he'll catch the brunt of what will surely be a one or two win season. The Browns could improve next season with all the picks they've gathered but is that a four or five game improvement? Even so that would amount to a two year losing record for Chud, which is all the shelf life coaches get in Cleveland.

Goodbye, Trent. You weren't ever good enough or bad enough to get all that emotional about. In that way, you were the perfect Cleveland Brown. With the trade Banner is on his way to achieving that same status.