



In Cleveland, we've become experts at identifying failed football leadership. A decade and a half of being exposed to it will tend to have that effect.

Joe Banner and Mike Lombardi, you fail. Please exit to the right, and continue collecting your paychecks for the ensuing five-odd years, per the particulars outlined in your lucrative contracts.

But ... They've only been on the job a year -- this is still a work in progress, right?

No. They've failed. It might not become evident until a few more losing seasons have accumulated and they actually receive their walking papers, but they've failed. This regime will end like all the others. With the main characters sitting at home, collecting ownership's money to not coach, not general manage and not preside, and the Browns once again looking for the same answers that have eluded the franchise for 15 years and counting.

They failed to hire a big-name coach last winter. Then they hired Rob Chudzinski, which they now admit was a failure by firing him after one season.

The firing itself was the result of a failure to step back and look at the situation from a global standpoint. Obsessed with the win-now culture that has infested the NFL, angered by the team's late-season swoon, and perhaps possessing delusions that the same types of big-name

coaches that turned the Browns down a year ago will now beat a path to Berea, Banner and Lombardi -- with the blessing of Jimmy Haslam -- gave Chud the quick hook five hours after finishing a 4-12 rookie season as an NFL head coach.

That would be a 4-12 season in which Chud was forced to start three different quarterbacks due to injuries and ineffectiveness. A season in which the starting tailback was traded three weeks in, and replaced with a rotation of has-beens and never-will-be's.

A season in which Greg Little and Davone Bess couldn't hang onto the ball, and even budding star Josh Gordon had his share of drops.

A season in which Gordon didn't even know if he'd be a Brown all year, until the trade deadline safely passed in October.

A season that, in spite of all that, was actually more competitive than the final record indicates. The Browns were flat-out robbed of a win in New England by poor (or biased?) officiating. They held late leads against the Jaguars and Bears before losing at the end. They put a scare into the then-undefeated Chiefs before losing by six points at always-hostile Arrowhead Stadium. They held halftime leads in each of their first six games.

Yes, there are no moral victories in the NFL. But Chud's perpetual-underdog team competed most weeks. They had their low points, to be sure -- the 41-20, Week 11 loss to Cincinnati started the second-half slide, and counts as the worst loss of the season in terms of both margin and impact -- but Chud's teams competed, and with this roster, what more can any rational observer expect?

Reading between the lines, what does that say about the rationality of the executives currently running the ship?

By firing Chud after 16 games, Banner and his crew wanted to send a message: no excuses, no compromises and total accountability. Perhaps in their ivory ego-tower, they truly believe that's what they did.

But the message they really sent was all about their willingness to toss their coach under the bus, deflect criticism from the shortcomings of the roster they assembled, and their lack of desire to pay anything more than lip service to the ideals of continuity and stability. You know, those odd, foreign principles that have seemed to help out organizations like the Patriots, Steelers and Ravens over the years.

And they didn't just send that message to the ticket-buying public. They sent it, loud and clear, to the guys in the locker room. Veteran team leaders Joe Thomas and D'Qwell Jackson were among the most vocal in their criticism of the firing.

When a free agent is considering contract offers, and he wants to get a real-deal picture of what the organization is really like, do you think he's going to take Banner's or Lombardi's words at face value? Of course not. He's going to get in touch with the likes of Thomas and Jackson. And what are they going to say? Let your imagination run wild with that one.

The Browns have their own free agents, too. Most notably, Pro Bowler Alex Mack and Pro Bowl alternate T.J. Ward. If Banner is arrogant enough to think a better coach can do more with his roster, he's probably arrogant enough to think he can replace Mack and Ward through the draft. So maybe this is a moot point. But if the Browns did want to try and re-sign either, the next Browns coach will be Coach No. 4 for Mack (drafted in 2009) and Coach No. 3 for Ward (drafted in 2010).

New coaches mean new playbooks and new coaching styles, which are long, difficult, macro-level adjustments in the world of football. You probably couldn't blame them if they preferred to continue their career in a place with a bit more consistency -- or any consistency, for that matter.

Everything about Chud's dismissal reeks of a startling disconnect in the minds of club leadership between how they perceive things and how things really are. Even measured by the long, sorry, limp, tepid, foul, rancid precedent that the Browns have set since 1999, this firing is bad medicine.

This won't end well. But that probably depends on your definition of "well." If "well" means 18 holes of golf at an exclusive country club while you're cashing seven-figure checks to not work for the team that fired you before your contract was up, "well" is actually quite well.

If "well" means enduring a deepening spiral of loss-splattered football misery that only seems to get worse no matter how bad it already is, well ... you'd have Cleveland.

That's the great thing about being a pro sports executive. Even if you fall flat on your face and damage your team for years to come, eventually it just becomes somebody else's problem. And you always come out smelling like greenbacks in the end.