



In what was a surprising move – even for a franchise that is synonymous with dysfunction – the Cleveland Browns fired head coach Rob Chudzinski Sunday night after just one year on the job.

And Browns fans are left wondering why they should believe anything that comes out of the mouths of team owner Jimmy Haslam or CEO Joe Banner.

Chudzinski becomes the first Browns coach to be fired after just one season in franchise history, so at least Haslam was truthful when he said things were going to be different with him as owner.

Officially, [the team “relieved” Chudzinski of his duties](#) (how very polite of them), saying they “needed to see progress with this football team. We needed to see development and improvement as the season evolved and, unfortunately, we took a concerning step backward in the second half of the year.

"Our fans deserve to see a consistently competitive team. We have high standards, and there's an urgency for success. When we believed we were not positioned to achieve significant progress in 2014, we knew we had to admit that a change was needed, and move forward."

Let's think about that statement for a moment. It's true that the team did not perform better in

the second half of the season, due in large part to the play of quarterback Jason Campbell – who was signed in the off-season by the current front office. There was also the continued under-performing of Davone Bess and Paul Kruger – free agents signed in the off-season by the current front office. (See a pattern developing here, Browns fans?)

As for the “urgency for success” part ... well that one is harder to figure out. If the Browns really have an “urgency for success” would they really have:

- Mostly sat out the 2013 NFL Draft after selecting Barkevious Mingo in the first round?
- Sat on more than \$20 million in cap space?
- Made no attempt to fix the problems at offensive guard?
- Made no attempt to fix the problems in the secondary?
- Made no attempt to fix the problems at inside linebacker?
- Made no attempt to fix the problem at running back?

With that kind of urgency, the Browns should be good around 2020 at the earliest.

Chudzinski said he was “shocked and disappointed” to be fired. You have to wonder, though, how shocked Chudzinski really was to hear the news since he worked for the organization twice before and should have a better understanding than most how things work in Berea.

While Chudzinski certainly deserves his share of the blame for another 4-12 season, it’s hard to see what moves he could have made that would have made a difference. He benched Brandon Weeden after two games and only went back to him after Brian Hoyer was injured. After the euphoria of Jason Campbell and his “moral victories” wore off, Chudzinski was left with the choice of Weeden – clearly not an option – or Campbell, who showed with his 1-7 record as a starter why no other team in the NFL was looking to sign him as a free agent last season.

You could also blame Chudzinski for the defense, which gave up 406 points this season – the most since 2000 – and was near the bottom of the league in both red zone defense and third-down efficiency. Of course Chudzinski isn’t the defensive coordinator.

While we’re not privy to the inner-workings of the team, we’re pretty sure Chud was not acting

alone when the Browns:

- Gave Desmond Bryant, a good player with a heart condition, \$15 million in guaranteed money and Kruger, a good player who is not a difference maker even though he is paid like one, \$21 million in guaranteed money.
- Gave Bess a contract extension after trading for him.
- Gave John Greco, who may not be very good, a contract extension that includes the second-highest roster bonus due to a player on the team in 2014.
- Drafted a cornerback in the third round in Leon McFadden who couldn't beat out Chris Owens, a player the Browns ultimately released.
- Tried to sell fans that Willis McGahee, Fozzy Whitaker and Edwin Baker were actual NFL running backs. (For all the credit the front office gets for trading Trent Richardson, he still outrushed the combined total of McGahee and Baker. And the first round pick the Browns received in the trade is only a win for the team if they use it to acquire an actual good player.)

If Chudzinski was the wrong man for the job, why is he the only one being held accountable? Shouldn't the people who hired him and built the roster also be in question?

This is what Banner said when the team hired Chudzinski in January: "The criteria that we went into the marketplace for, which as we told you, we were focusing on a strong leader. Somebody who can create a culture in an entire program, put together a strong staff and manage it and was really, really committed to setting a very high bar and achieving it. We're very excited about having Rob here and believe he fits exactly what we were looking for."

Banner conveniently forgot to add the part about how the new coach only had 11 months to create the culture for the entire program.

In firing Chudzinski after just one season, Banner is sending the message that he believes the roster is more talented than the record would indicate, something he talked about in his introductory news conference more than a year ago.

"But I've seen people take over a franchise in which you looked at the roster and you're like, 'Oh, my God. There's nothing here to build on.' This is not the case here. This is certainly not one of those situations where you look at the roster and you're kind of like, 'Oh, my God. I'm just

starting from scratch here. Or what am I going to do and how long is this going to take?' There's clearly a foundation of players that you can start to add to and move forward from as opposed to needing to get to begin with."

That raises a bigger question, one that combined with the firing of Chudzinski, should make Browns fans very nervous about the decision-making capabilities of the people in charge.

The majority of the team, including top players Josh Gordon, Jordan Cameron, Jabaal Sheard, Phil Taylor, Joe Haden and T.J. Ward, was put together by former general manager Tom Heckert. So if this roster is so talented, why did Banner fire Heckert in the first place?

This latest move is just another in a series where Banner and general manager Mike Lombardi come off as wanting to show everyone that they are the smartest guys in the room. But as a wise person once told us, it's OK not to be the smartest person in the room because that is how you continue to learn and continue to grow. Maybe if the Browns had put that on a wall in Berea, the team would be further along in its latest rebuild.

During [Monday's news conference announcing the firing](#) , Haslam and Banner worked hard to try to convince the fan base, and probably themselves, that this isn't a step backward for the franchise.

"I feel really confident that we have the right people to take this organization where we need to. What I want our fans to hear is nobody cares about winning and is going to work any harder to get us there than the people you're looking at right now, particularly the owner," Haslam said. "We take this extremely seriously, and I purposefully said what I said earlier. It galls me when you all write, and you have the right to do it and people have the right to say it, 'Same old Browns.' It's our single mission to change that."

"I think the fact that we are making this change makes a statement that we're not going to accept not being really successful," Banner said. "Whether you agree with the decision or not, that's an important message for our fans to hear. It may be one of the things that we feel will make a difference as we go forward. We are going to demand of everybody, especially and starting with ourselves, that we be successful. If we're not, we're going to do what we need to do to get there."

As to why a coach would be willing to take a job knowing the front office will throw him overboard at the first sign of trouble? Well, Haslam didn't really answer that question.

"I feel confident that we're going to be able to convince people that this is not a good, but a great place to coach, where they'll have great support and everything they need to be successful," he said. "Now, talk is cheap as I've said earlier and we'll know a year from now, two years from now or maybe six months from now if we're successful at that."

But with everything that has gone on in the past year, why should fans believe anything these two say?

Haslam at least acknowledged that the front office has betrayed the trust of the fans.

"I understand why there is skepticism," he said. "I don't think anything that we say over the next few days is going to change anybody's mind. We've got to go out and produce better results. That's all we can say and that's all we can do and there's nobody that understands that better than the two of us."

When he took over the team, Haslam promised that things were finally going to be different. But just a little more than a year later, the only thing that has changed are the names. It is going to take a long time and a lot of work to win back the trust of the fans.

Until then? Same old Browns.

*(Photo courtesy of ClevelandBrowns.com)*