



As the Cleveland Browns go about the business of finding still another new head coach, the lull this creates before the smoke billows from Berea indicating that a coach has been secured gives fans the distance they need to process their team's latest misstep.

Distance isn't making the heart grow fonder.

The best that can be said, the absolute best, is that if the Browns' critical thinkers didn't believe Rob Chudzinski could get this team to the playoffs, let alone the Super Bowl, then continuing to push that rock up that hill was a fool's errand.

Of course that was just as true the day Chudzinski was fired and the argument in response is still just as relevant: did these critical thinkers, the one who hired Chudzinski less than 12 months prior, give him a fair or even fighting chance?

To this point no one in Berea is commenting for the record on this issue except in oblique terms and that's the wound that still chafes. It's at the core, really, of the fans frustrations with the carpetbagging owner and the handpicked carpetbaggers he hired to supposedly turn things around.

This franchise is beset by a perpetual need to find the right person to lead it to the Promised Land, a person who can lead irrespective of the crude tools he's given to accomplish the task.

It's as if this deity will arrive on horseback from some mystical land where winners are curated. Fans have been sold so many versions of that right person that by this point it seems like there isn't any one or any system or any approach that hasn't been tried. And yet, failure. That either means that this franchise has institutionalized exactly how poor choices get made or it lacks the patience, commitment and ability to give any one of its messiahs a fighting chance. It's probably both.

To this point owner Jimmy Haslam along with CEO Joe Banner seem to be operating under the belief that winning cures all. I suppose it might but this team is so far from achieving that objective that one can't help but ponder all the interim steps it takes to achieve it. That seems to be what Haslam and Banner are missing both for their own account and for the fans.

Haslam thinks that no one wants to win more than him. I'm pretty sure that isn't true. While Haslam was dipping his ownership toe into the waters of Pittsburgh, these Browns fans were well into years of cycling through owners, coaches, systems and players with unparalleled frequency. With each new start, fans were counseled to be patient by one pretender or another as the regime du jour looked earnestly into a camera and told fans that no one wanted to win more than them.

The level of failure by this franchise for so long is actually quite stunning. Given how seriously the NFL takes its quest for parity among its teams, it takes a special effort to remain an outlier. The New England Patriots are the right kind of outliers. The Browns are the same statistical abnormality, just in the wrong direction.

The net effect of all this is that it has created a hardened cynicism among a dwindling fan base. Haslam and Banner may think that winning will reignite the chastened fans and create a base that is as big as ever. They'd do well to better understand their intended audience and the history they've endured before making such assumptions.

The last time that this franchise didn't suffer a losing season for a sustained period of time was from 1985 through 1989. A young fan coming of age in that period was brought to the game by a parent who themselves came of age in the '60s, when the team was much more successful on the field. It was a fan base easily embraced by the next generation

But since then that fan has had to sit through 25 more seasons, including the 4 when there wasn't even a team, without anything resembling success. Now that same young fan is nearing 40 years of age and well into begetting the next generation. He or she has gone through high school, maybe college, but in any case is well entrenched in a career, has a spouse and probably kids who are now about the same age he or she was when they first became a fan.

That fan, brought into the game by enthusiastic parents has systematically had that enthusiasm extracted from him since his youth. How could he not? The team has averaged a mere 6 wins a season and there have only been three winning seasons. For good measure it lost in usually the most ignominious and miserable fashion imaginable.

That fan's parents on the other hand got to see teams that won with far more regularity, averaging a winning season every other year in those previous 25 seasons. There were division titles, playoff games, actual excitement. There also were only 4 coaches during those seasons. There have been 4 coaches just during the last 6 years.

It doesn't surprise that those young fans of 25 years ago have stopped watching the Browns not just because there wasn't a team for 4 years but because when the team returned it undertook to play almost as a mission project the most insidious brand of football imaginable. Most years the team has been nearly unwatchable. I suppose it would be one thing if the Browns for all these years had been an entertaining mess. Mostly they've been boring.

That gave all of the other entertainment options and distractions a chance to take on a greater role because there was an actual void to fill. It's not that their kids had any less desire to be entertained. It's that the Browns stopped being entertaining and each wave of impressionable kids with parents who stopped caring had little reason to look to the Browns for anything. Check out the demographics of fans attending games. It's as if you can count the number of kids on one hand.

This is the point that Haslam and Banner can't seem to grasp. Sure, they changed course quickly, but they did change course again. That means new coaches, new systems, new players. There are no overnight success stories in the NFL no matter what Banner tried to imply when tearing down the construction job he put up when he hired Chudzinski in the first place. The fans understand that I suspect better than Haslam and Banner. They know that success remains an ethereal concept, years away at best. That means more losing and more reasons to stop watching all together.

The Browns' critical thinkers believe they're doing the right thing and maybe time will tell. But what they've missed entirely is that whatever goodwill they entered into this relationship with has been eviscerated. They haven't just lost the fans' interest. They've lost their loyalty. There's an entire generational fan base missing from the equation and by the time this team has even a sporting chance to be entertaining that lost fan base will span nearly a generation and a half. Meanwhile what fans they have left just grow older and less engaged.

Winning may spark interest but it will take more than a winning season or two to capture a lost generation of fans let alone instill in that lost generation enough enthusiasm to pass it forward to their kids.

Haslam and Banner can dawdle and experiment like mad scientists trying to create the perfect coaching bot all they want. At some point though if they ever bother to look up they'll likely notice that fewer and fewer people are even watching.