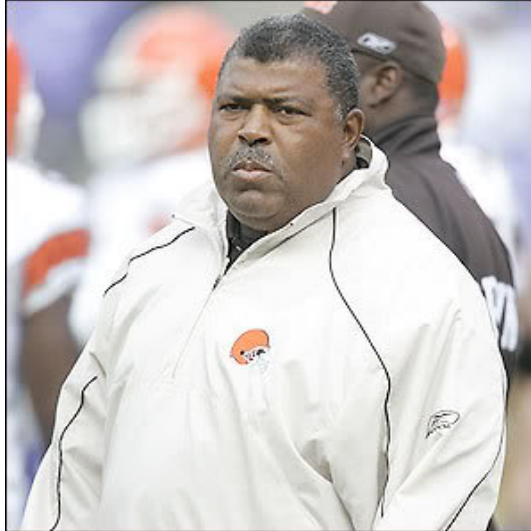


Where there's smoke, there's usually fire. And yesterday, three different independent outlets released reports indicating that league sources are telling them that BOTH Romeo Crennel and Phil Savage could be given their walking papers next week when owner Randy Lerner comes to town to demand accountability for the team's latest train wreck of a season. I've got the reports, the links, and the analysis inside.



Where there's smoke, you'll usually find fire. And smoke is presently billowing from the rooftop of the Browns team headquarters in Berea, Ohio.

Yesterday, three different independent media outlets reported that Browns owner Randy Lerner will meet with general manager Phil Savage early next week to discuss the future of head coach Romeo Crennel. Crennel is 10-21 in his first 31 games as Browns head coach, and has posted a miserable 1-11 record against AFC North division foes.

We'll start with Peter King, the longtime NFL columnist for Sports Illustrated and www.SI.com, and contributor to HBO's "Inside The NFL". King wrote the following in his weekly column on Sports Illustrated's website:

http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2006/writers/peter_king/12/28/week17/index.html

Poor Romeo Crennel. What a good man ... a man who deserves a third year with the Browns to try to make it right. I'm just not sure, after his owner and GM meet early next week, if he's going to get that chance.

King also went on to address the issue on "Inside The NFL" last night, saying that his gut tells him that Romeo is a dead man walking. Love him or hate him, King is as plugged into the NFL and its inner circles as any writer out there.

In addition, the NFL rumor mongering website www.ProFootballTalk.com also released a report yesterday along the same lines. The interesting thing about the PFT report was that also mentioned that their sources are telling them that General Manager Phil Savage may be in hot water as well. Here's the report they released last night ...

<http://www.profootballtalk.com/rumormill.htm>

SAVAGE GETTING CANNED NEXT WEEK?

Last year at this time, former Browns president John Collins was in the process of pushing G.M. Phil Savage out the door. Coach Romeo Crennel and owner Randy Lerner intervened, and Savage stayed.

Not long thereafter, Collins was out.

This time around, there are rumors that Savage could get the shoe next week from Lerner.

Peter King reports on HBO's Inside the NFL that Savage and Lerner will meet after the regular season ends to discuss the future of Crennel. King says he has a gut feeling that Crennel will be let go.

Our sources tell us that both Crennel and Savage are vulnerable.

And that would make sense. It was Savage, after all, who hired Crennel. Why should the G.M. be any less accountable than the head coach? We realize that, traditionally, the G.M. gets at least one mulligan (or, in the case of Matt Millen, two). But both guys should be in the same boat, in our not-so-humble opinion.

Another possibility is that Savage will transition into a scouting-only role, and that a G.M. will be hired to handle the bigger picture. There were reports along these lines earlier in the year, and such an outcome has worked well in New York, where former G.M. Terry Bradway took a step down in connection with the promotion of Mike Tannenbaum.

On top of all of this, on WKNR's "Happy Hour With Kenny Roda" yesterday, their NFL Insider Mike Brown was a guest. Brown stated that a very reliable source of his, who has

ties to several prominent people deep inside the league, told him yesterday afternoon that Romeo is as good as gone, and the chances are strong that Savage may be too. Allegedly (and not surprisingly) Lerner is furious with the teams lack of progress and is ready to blow this thing up yet again.

My guess? These reports are accurate. As much as people love to downplay and degrade rumors like this ... the bottom line is that recent history has proven them to be accurate more often than not.

Lerner will meet with Savage on either Monday or Tuesday. My gut tells me that he'll tell him that Crennel is being fired, and that Savage must either accept a demotion to "head of scouting" or follow him out the door. Lerner will likely make a strong play to keep Savage in that role, keeping his pay the same, or at a level he will be unable to receive elsewhere. At the end of the day though, that would be a big piece of humble pie for Phil to digest. And despite a spotty track record here in two years as GM, there would more than likely be another team still willing to roll the dice on Phil for a prominent front office role based on his draft success back in Baltimore.

The bottom line is this: Randy has to do something. Bringing back Romeo Crennel next season would generate no fan interest above it's presently low level. This fan base is FED UP, disgusted, and only a very small segment is still willing to spend their hard earned dollars supporting this team. The days of filling the stadium to continue to watch an inferior product are over. Sales of Browns merchandise, interest in luxury suites, season ticket sales, corporate sponsorship partners ... all of these revenue generating sources would take a beating if the team brought back the lackluster Romeo, and fall apart completely if the team got off to another poor start and had to fire him in-season next year.

I completely expect the Browns to make a very hard play for Jim Tressel once they fire Romeo and the Buckeyes defeat Florida for their second national title in four years under his rule. Why would Randy not make that play? While it would upset some fans who adore both teams (myself included), and want to see The Sweater Vest stay put, hiring Tressel would make the last eight years of disappointment and disaster almost appear as if they were wiped from record books. Fan interest, excitement, and fervor would jump off the charts ... an almost unthinkable proposition given what these fans have been through. Tressel would do wonders for fan morale, the attitudes of the guys on the team, as well as revenues. It's a no-brainer to me that Randy will make this play, and make it strong ... offering Tressel a blank check, some control over the way the team is run and personnel decisions, and the opportunity to become a coaching legend locally and nationally by taking both the Buckeyes and Browns to the mountaintop.

Let's be honest though. Despite the fact that Tressel grew up a Browns fan, idolizing Paul Brown, he'd be insane to leave the factory he has built in Columbus and come up north to Cleveland. I put the chances that he would make such a move at less than 25%. However, nothing would surprise me in sports anymore. If Tressel resists Randy's flirtations, look for Lerner to bring in an established name that would appease the fan base, and make winning now look like reality. The names that come to mind? Jon Gruden, Dick Vermeil, Jim Mora Jr ...

potentially even Bill Cowher or the "hot" offensive coordinator from San Diego, Cam Cameron.

As far as the General Manager job goes, if Savage is cut loose or demoted, expect the Browns to make a play at a big name for this role as well. The two most prominent choices, and both guys the team expressed interest in two years ago, are former Brown great Ozzie Newsome, and Scott Pioli out in New England. Former Dolphin GM Rick Spielman (brother of former Buckeye Chris) and the Falcons Rich McKay would also be likely candidates that Lerner would look to speak to.

The winds of change, they are a blowin' out in Berea. Romeo Crennel's days appear to be numbered. Not only is this the right decision, but Randy Lerner has no choice.