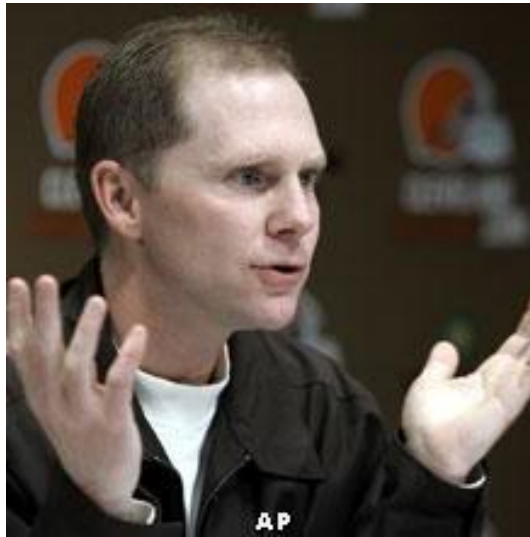


Talking The Talk

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, January 11 2007 7:00 PM -

What if they gave a press conference and no one cared? You almost got the sense that that was the undercurrent in Wednesday



What if they gave a press conference and no one cared? You almost got the sense that that was the undercurrent in Wednesday's unofficial State of the Browns press briefing by Browns General Manager Phil Savage.

It's hard to tell if the collective yawn over what Savage had to say is more a reflection on Savage personally or is the result of a populace beaten down by awfulness over such an extended period of time that mediocrity has now become an acceptable goal. Because Savage's personality just doesn't seem to generate the kinds of hostile reactions reserved for, say Braylon Edwards, he probably deserves the benefit of the doubt that the fans are just worn thin by the double whammy of a particularly awful Browns season followed-up by a particularly disappointing ending to the Ohio State Buckeye's season.

But much of what Savage had to say Wednesday provided a nice complement to a similar session Cleveland Indians owner Paul Dolan had with Les Levine recently. (Read Tony Lastoria's excellent recap [here](#))

In each, both came across as earnest and seemingly in touch with the issues at the forefront of most fan's minds. But in each case, no real questions were answered and no compelling reasons were given for fans to not respond skeptically.

In the case of Dolan, he promised, once again, that the Indians are in a “win now” mode and that they won’t let the budget necessarily constrain them from doing what’s necessary to make that happen. Dolan didn’t attempt to explain how this year is any different then, say, the end of the 2005 season or what exactly put ownership in that mode. And since Dolan has yet to actually deliver on such promises, any skepticism that he’ll actually deliver is quite warranted.

Whether you think it’s been done correctly or not, the Indians did seem to address their biggest needs in the off-season, second base and the bullpen. But once again, the budget did seem to have a huge impact on how General Manager Mark Shapiro went about meeting those needs, particularly in the bullpen. It’s true that this off season was a particular challenge for teams like Cleveland because of the lack of fiscal restraint some teams exercised in pursuing their needs. But on the other hand, that’s always the case except for that one year when the owners, under the direction of Commissioner Peter Ueberroth, colluded in order to keep salaries down. In other words, it’s a convenient excuse, even if there is some truth to it.

This isn’t to suggest that the Dolans should simply give Shapiro a blank check. But it is meant to suggest that until the Dolans actually back up their words with concrete actions that don’t involve continuously restocking the team each off season by giving one-year contracts to former stars with injury problems, the fans aren’t likely to buy what he’s selling. Dolan has to realize that after the debacle of the 2005 off season that led to the disappointing 2006 season, the fans are going to continue to keep their distance and to treat his words cautiously.

This is the space where Savage now finds himself as well. It wasn’t long ago when Savage was the likeable new kind in town. In the power struggle between former Browns president John Collins and Savage, the fans’ choice was clear and Lerner listened. Collins, whose expertise was marketing, was shown the door (politely and with cash, the Randy Lerner way) and Savage, the guy who seemed to possess actual football knowledge was retained. But a team that lost two more games than the previous year being led by a genial but overmatched aging coordinator with gaping blind spots is enough to turn anyone’s loyalties.

Savage has to find a way to turn it around and his performance during the press conference wasn’t necessarily a good first step. While Savage speaks confidently and, seemingly,

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honestly, he needs to realize that he speaks so rarely in such forums that he simply hasn't developed enough of a rapport with either the media or the fans for anyone to get a true read on whether or not he has the Browns going in the right direction.

When he says, for example, that "there's no way I can look in the mirror and say this is all Romeo Crennel's fault," it suggests that he does hold Crennel responsible for some things but not necessarily everything. But where is that line drawn and why? That's what's important to most fans as they try to sort out for themselves whether a continued financial and emotional investment in this team is worth the trouble.

Savage hinted that team malcontent Edwards needs to mature, but on the other hand he was just as quick to underscore that Edwards really is a swell guy and teammate and that he and Kellen Winslow, Jr. are the future of the offense. Great, just what Edwards needed, more reason to fuel an already petulant attitude.

And, like Dolan, Savage says things that are hard to swallow. While he may not have strained the patience of the fans like Dolan did when he said the Indians were in a "win now" mode, he did venture fairly far out on the limb in his comments about Edwards and when he suggested that Crennel has full control over his staff. This begs the question as to who then, exactly, fired Carl Crennell II, Romeo's nephew.

Cleveland fans may be paranoid but they are a resilient bunch. They've survived worse than either Dolan or Savage, far worse, and have remained relatively loyal. But both need to start delivering results, particularly Savage and the Browns, or else today's skepticism will turn into tomorrow's indifference, a far worse fate.