

Thin Skinned

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, January 16 2007 7:00 PM -

There may not be much fight in the Browns on the field, but there is no shortage of it in the front office if the recent dust-up between Plain Dealer associate editor and part-time editorial columnist Phillip Morris and Browns vice president of communications, Bill Bonsiewicz, is any indication. A week ago, Morris wrote a column essentially questioning Randy Lerner



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A week ago, Morris wrote a column essentially questioning Randy Lerner's commitment to Cleveland and the Browns given the sad state of affairs in Berea. This isn't exactly a new thought, (see our article [here](#)) but it was somewhat refreshing to see that, finally, someone at the Plain Dealer was raising the question. Of course it may have been too much to ask that this question be raised on the sports pages of the PD but at least the issue found its way in print in Cleveland.

What Morris' initial [column](#) lacked in insight it more than made up for in passion, something usually in short supply at the Plain Dealer. Morris spoke not as a sportswriter but more as a fan who is sick of losing and sees an unemotional owner in Lerner who is seemingly more interested in investing in European soccer than in the Browns. Morris didn't exactly make a compelling case though by suggesting, for example, that Lerner demonstrate his commitment by spending more. Next time Morris may want to vet his thinking process a bit further with

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someone a bit more knowledgeable because the issue isn't the lack of spending by the Browns, given the NFL's salary cap, it's the lack of ability to spend their dollars wisely. Still, the overarching question is fair.

Because Morris' musings appeared on the editorial pages we figured it would be mostly ignored, given the rather low regard, generally, that the PD's editorial pages are held by most folks. And it was, except by the Browns. Showing that an incredibly thin skin exists within the management and ownership ranks of the Browns, Bonsiewicz, utilizing his official title, wrote a rather terse [letter](#) to the editor last Saturday. In it, he gripes that if Morris thinks Lerner is a lousy owner, he should just say so rather than dance around it. He also takes Morris to task for not understanding the rudimentary workings of the NFL and its salary cap and says that Lerner is committed to the Browns because look at how low he's kept the ticket prices. Finally, in the kind of vague reference he criticized Morris for making in the first place, Bonsiewicz concluded by asking, "Want a new owner? Be careful what you wish for."

And Bonseiwiecz wonders why anyone would question Lerner's loyalty? Maybe it's because the only time Lerner talks publicly, it's under very controlled circumstances, such as with the Browns flagship radio station where he won't be forced to answer anything more difficult than what he had for breakfast. Maybe it's because it's insulting to suggest that the reason the Browns ticket prices are so low is because Lerner is a swell guy and not because even Lerner isn't so naïve as to risk alienating the fan base for good by asking people to pay more for a product whose quality continues to deteriorate. And maybe, just maybe, it's because Lerner employs publicists who can't edit their own thoughts or letters and instead of easing the situation, which they're paid to do, fuel the fire by writing letters in their official capacity that impliedly threaten that if fans and writers continue to hurt Lerner's feelings he may run to England permanently and sell this franchise to David Modell.

If Bonsiewicz thought that his rather childish response would put an end to it, he's as clueless as Kimberly Ethridge, the now former publicist of Tyrell Owens who disputed reports of a T.O. suicide attempt by saying he had "25 million reasons why he should be alive." That's because Morris [revisited](#) this issue in this morning's Plain Dealer if only to detail the bizarre response from Bonsiewicz in Saturday's paper as well as Morris' even longer, more bizarre letter to Morris personally.

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This would be a better fight if Morris was more up to the task. While he rightly notes that Bonsiewicz introduced a question that had never been raised, he essentially revisits his original point in a typically clumsy manner, concluding that the problem with Lerner is that he just doesn't get mad enough and that he should threaten to show the door to anyone satisfied with losing.

Well, that's a plan, but hardly the best plan. We doubt that the problem with this management and this owner is that they are happy about losing, particularly in such spectacular fashion. The problem of course is much more complex but has its roots, clearly, in a constant lack of leadership.

In some ways, this reminds us of the debate currently raging over whether Marty Schottenheimer should be fired by San Diego. On one side of the debate are those who rightly point out that he didn't personally commit the turnovers or fail to make the plays that caused his teams to consistently lose in the playoffs. On the other side are those who rightly point out that whatever the problem, he's never been able to get the job done. The man does have a track record.

The same is true with Lerner. As Bonsiewicz points out, it's not as if Lerner can strap on the pads himself and play a few downs to solve the problem. But acting as if Lerner is not a significant part of the problem ignores the fact that the only constant since the Browns returned is that they've been owned by the Lerner's. Ultimately the task falls now to Randy Lerner to figure out why the Browns continue to be a laughing stock and it is perfectly legitimate for anyone to question whether Lerner's interest in English soccer has diverted much needed attention away from these important issues.

Frankly, the fact that Bonsiewicz and Lerner are so sensitive to criticism that they would publish a veiled threat in such a cowardly fashion should be enough to scare even the most casual fan. It not only demonstrates that neither "gets it" when it comes to understanding the rights, privileges and obligations of owning a professional sports franchise like the Browns, it also demonstrates an amazing lack of sensitivity toward a fan based rubbed raw by an endless stream of pathetic performances.

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If Bonsiewicz thinks for a moment that most Browns fans wouldn't trade Lerner for an owner who could actually win, then he sadly underestimates the real interests of the paying customers. Browns fans didn't acquire their hatred for Modell until he moved the franchise. No one is necessarily looking to push Lerner away, but he doesn't help his cause by spending a good deal of the season fiddling in England while the Browns were burning in Cleveland. If Bonsiewicz and/or Lerner really felt the need to respond to a column that few probably read in the first place, the least he could have done was show some empathy for the fans instead of trying to protect Lerner's fragile ego. By doing so, he demonstrated what most already suspected, this thing isn't going to get turned around anytime soon.