

The Coaching Merry-Go-Round

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Maybe it was always this way, but it certainly seems like these days the amount of activity in the week between the NFL's conference championship games and the Super Bowl has increased, particularly on the coaching front.

There always has been a certain amount of shuffling that goes on as teams complete their seasons and try to position themselves for the next, but this off-season has been more fascinating than most, probably because the Browns, once again, are such active players.

Browns GM Phil Savage decided to fall on his sword just a bit and retain head coach Romeo Crennel. Apparently Savage sees something in Crennel that most others don't, but on the other hand that's what Savage is paid to decide. But just as apparently Savage saw little value in a fair portion of Crennel's staff and so now the Browns are busy trying to fill an ever increasing amount of openings.

The biggest hire, of course, was Rob Chudzinski as offensive coordinator (see our comments here). Now they have added Alfredo Roberts as the tight ends coach and are searching for at least two other significant positions, special teams and offensive line. Jerry Rosburg, the previous special teams coach, supposedly left abruptly to join Bobby Petrino in Atlanta. And Jeff Davidson, who was passed over for the vacant offensive coordinator position here, took that position in Carolina after Dan Henning was recently fired.

We detect some minor hand wringing from some over the loss of Davidson, which should abate quickly. Davidson was never officially given the title of offensive coordinator once Savage finally ordered Crennel to dump Maurice Carthon. This should have sent a message to Davidson well before the perfunctory interview he had with Savage and Crennel. Moreover, if anything malcontent receiver Braylon Edwards was worse once Carthon left. This didn't reflect well on Davidson's leadership. Finally, and most importantly, the offensive line, Davidson's primary responsibility, is and remains a mess. Given all this, we wonder what Carolina sees in him but that's another column for another day.

There have been other significant developments that are or should be of interest to Browns fans, particularly considering how incestuous the league has become in the coaching ranks. Bill Parcells retired, again. How his former job in Dallas gets filled may have a direct impact on how the Browns may be able to fill their inevitable opening in the head coaching slot next year.

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Many fans believe that Crennel was retained solely to buy time until Bill Cowher can be hired free and clear of any obligations he still has to Pittsburgh. Of course many of these same folks also believe that Rich Karlis did indeed miss that field goal against the Browns and that most games are fixed but that's beside the point. Cowher would be a great fit in Cleveland because he has a proven track record, which is exactly why the Browns would never hire him in the first place.

But suspending reality and taking the leap that the Browns are just this shrewd, Jerry Jones is just the kind of owner capable of throwing a turd into that punch bowl. Jones likes to make a splash, just as he did in hiring Parcels in the first place and bringing in the single biggest clubhouse cancer in the history of the league, receiver Terrell Owens. In other words, we don't see Jones hiring someone like Lane Kiffin, the recently hired 31-year-old ex-USC offensive coordinator hired by the Raiders. Jones is significantly more flashy, which is where Cowher comes in. We can foresee a scenario in which Jones goes after Cowher now, even if he had to pay some sort of compensation to Pittsburgh. Even if Cowher insists on not coaching next season, which seems likely, Jones could still get him under contract in some sort of consultant role, again even if it costs him some compensation to Pittsburgh. But even if Jones doesn't secure Cowher, he likely will take another top notch coaching talent off the market and hence him unavailable ultimately to the Browns.

Speaking of Kiffin, his hiring may have a greater impact on what ultimately happens in Berea than most think. It's not clear if Kiffin was the only person left who would take the job working for the fossilized Al Davis or whether he was the winner of some reality-based show on the NFL Network called "Coach My Team." We don't know of course because most still can't get the NFL Network on their local cable channel. But what is of interest is the fact that Kiffin is only 31, reinforcing the trend we've noted previously—that a sea change is taking place in the NFL and hires like Crennel are the exception and not the trend.

There will still be franchises looking to catch one more fire in one more bottle by hiring re-treads like Marty Schottenheimer or Dick Vermeil. There will also be franchises run by contrarians who feel that the aging assistant ignored by everyone else for twenty years is their best bet for getting to the Promised Land. But those kinds of hires are getting fewer and farther between.

Of all the head coaches hired this off-season Petrino with Atlanta and Cam Cameron with Miami are the oldest at 45 years of age. Kiffin, as noted, is 31, and Mike Tomlin with Pittsburgh is 34. Of even greater note is the fact that none had NFL head coaching experience or even exceptionally deep experience as a key assistant. As coaches like Sean Payton in New Orleans and Eric Mangini in New York proved experience alone is hardly the tipping point. Both of these trends are probably as good an indication as any that when Crennel gets dumped after next season, the Browns will go young, which is why it is wise to keep your eye on both Chudzinski and Todd Grantham, the most likely successors from the current staff. Of course, the fact that teams are having success with this new paradigm is also as good as any indication that Browns probably will do the opposite. They usually do.