

## Marty's Parting

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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It's hard to know if San Diego Chargers owner Dean Spanos is a mad genius or just mad. Either way, the Chargers find themselves without a head coach or any viable internal candidates and, in a small way, the Cleveland Browns are partially to blame.

By now, most know the story. Chargers head coach Marty Schottenheimer, who held similar positions with Cleveland, Kansas City and Washington, is once again unemployed despite going 14-2 this past season and despite having won 200 games in his long coaching career. Apparently Schottenheimer and Chargers GM A.J. Smith had the kind of dysfunctional front office/management relationship that made the John Collins/Phil Savage relationship seem positively giddy by comparison. According to ESPN's John Clayton (see article [here](#)), the relationship began to deteriorate in 2003, that deterioration accelerated in 2004 and by last season Smith and Schottenheimer weren't even speaking.

For Browns fans, the most interesting aspect of the firing is what accelerated it. First, some background. The relationship between Schottenheimer and Smith was well known, of course, to Spanos, but after a surprising regular season that resulted in the Chargers owning the best record at 14-2, followed by the usual Schottenheimer melt-down in the playoffs, Spanos opted initially to retain Schottenheimer. After all, you can't fire a coach who just went 14-2, can you? But negotiations between Schottenheimer and Spanos broke down on the length of a longer term contract and Schottenheimer decided to stick with a one-year contract.

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This created a more or less untenable situation for most of Schottenheimer's assistants. First, Schottenheimer lost offensive coordinator Cam Cameron, who went to Miami as head coach. Then, last week, defensive coordinator Wade Phillips was named head coach in Dallas. Those kinds of losses were not unexpected. What was unexpected, however, was the fleeing of the other assistants, who sensed an increasingly insecure environment given Schottenheimer's tenuous status. Apparently, though, one of the last straws for Spanos was the Browns hiring of Rod Chudzinski as offensive coordinator. Apparently, according to ESPN's Clayton, Smith had actually denied permission to Chudzinski to even interview with Cleveland. Schottenheimer, however, countermanded that decision and let Chudzinski interview. Quickly thereafter, the Browns pounced and put Chudzinski under a three-year contract. A similar scenario played out two additional times with other assistants, leaving the San Diego staffed nearly vacant. That makes the decision to can Schottenheimer all the more strange.

In retrospect, though, it seems like Spanos was aching to fire Schottenheimer all along and just waiting for the right moment, which came as soon as the Cowboys filled their vacancy. It's one thing to fire one of the more successful regular season coaches in NFL history, it's a whole other thing to let that coach go and immediately land elsewhere. And make no mistake about it, Cowboys owner Jerry Jones would have jumped at the chance to hire Schottenheimer instead of Phillips had the opportunity presented itself. Now Schottenheimer faces the likely prospect of sitting out next season while Phillips, his former defensive coordinator, gets the opportunity to advance an already decent Cowboys team.

For Schottenheimer, this was just another ignominious end to another coaching job. Most will recall that he left Cleveland in late 1988 after another personality conflict that erupted when Art Modell insisted that Schottenheimer hire an offensive coordinator. Schottenheimer had taken over play calling duties that season when Lindy Infante left the previous season to take the head coaching job in Green Bay. In Kansas City, he resigned after going 8-8 and failing to get to the playoffs. Dan Snyder fired Schottenheimer after one inglorious season in Washington.

The most curious aspect of Schottenheimer's career, however, is how underappreciated he seems to be as compared to someone like Bill Cowher. The two have nearly identical regular season winning percentages. Schottenheimer lifetime is 200-126-1 for a .613 winning percentage and Cowher is 149-90-1 for a .623 winning percentage. But the difference in how the two are perceived likely comes down to two factors. First, of course, is the playoff record. Whereas Cowher is 12-9 with one Super Bowl title, Schottenheimer is 5-13 with no titles. The second factor is how those records were compiled. Cowher spent his entire coaching career (to this point) with Pittsburgh, while Schottenheimer just completed his fourth different coaching

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stint. In other words, Schottenheimer is perceived as a retread even though he has one of the more impressive coaching resumes you're likely to see.

Unless another job suddenly opens up, for example if Andy Reid's one-month leave in Philadelphia becomes permanent while he addresses family issues, Schottenheimer will find himself in someone's broadcast booth next year. Following the 2008 season, there will certainly be more openings, including a possible opening in Cleveland. Whether Schottenheimer gets one of those jobs or even wants one of those jobs is unknown. And while many Browns fans still squirm at thoughts of the Drive and the Fumble, at this point in their existence the Browns could do much worse than bringing back Schottenheimer. With Marty, at least you know what you get-a conservative coach who believes in running the ball. We'd also get something that's been missing since the Browns returned, a coach with a winning record and attitude.