

Down San Diego Way

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, February 20 2007 7:00 PM -

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The news that Browns center LeCharles Bentley is likely out for 2007 was hardly unexpected. After all, a Cleveland sports franchise careening down the track like a runaway train, well, it's expected. But once in awhile it is fun to watch someone else's carnival from a distant and what's recently taken place in San Diego is surely worth a smile or two on another dismal Cleveland day.

To recap, San Diego finished 14-2 in the regular season. As someone noted recently, Browns fans didn't even know a team was allowed to win that many games in a season. But then San Diego ran into Bill Belichick and the New England Patriots in the playoffs. It was probably the best game of the entire NFL season with the Patriots barely surviving the encounter. But that victory came at a high price the following week as the Patriots simply wore down in the second half against Peyton Manning and the Indianapolis Colts.

The loss also extracted a heavy price on the Chargers. As the Chargers players prepared to play in the AFC divisional playoff game, Chargers fans were doing their part by acting like they were in Cleveland, focusing not on the task at hand but the potentially dreadful outcome that a Schottenheimer-coached team was likely to deliver, it was the fitting confirmation to them and to GM A.J. Smith and team president/owner's son, Dean Spanors, of the fear that comes with hiring Schottenheimer: great in the regular season, lousy in the playoffs.

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But this is where the fun really began. It's not exactly an embarrassment to lose to a Bill Belichick-coached team. It's happened to many, many teams in recent years as Belichick, to the endless frustration of Browns fans, has molded himself into one of the greatest head coaches in NFL history. But rather than opt for perspective, Smith and Spanos acted instead like they had just been shut out by the Browns in preseason and decided they had to address the "Marty factor."

It was no secret, of course, that Smith and Schottenheimer simply didn't get along and rarely spoke, so the loss wasn't likely to warm that relationship much. Clearly even without the playoff loss, this was a rock headed for the windshield. But rather than find a way to fix the underlying problem for the good of the team, particularly in light of a tough loss, the two most prominent members of the front office let the dysfunction fester and Spanos, apparently the team president in the same way that Mike Brown was the head of FEMA, sat nearby, fiddling. Without any intervention whatsoever, it's likely Schottenheimer would have simply left of his own accord. It's what he does. He creates his own self-fulfilling prophecies that usually start and end with him insisting on some member of his family getting a job with the team. But Spanos at least pause to consider the public relations disaster that comes with letting go the coach who helped restore the team to glory and apparently initially prevailed upon Smith to keep Schottenheimer. But it wasn't as if Smith put aside his differences. Instead, he reached a compromise with Spanos by deciding to offer Schottenheimer a low-ball one-year extension instead of a long-term deal.

Schottenheimer, clearly not at his first dance, declined the token gesture. Of course, since Spanos was going to can him anyway, the only thing Schottenheimer ensured by standing on some misguided principal was one less year of salary free and clear of the obligation to work for it. Given Schottenheimer's reaction to their offer, this was probably the time for Spanos to actually pull the plug, but that would have only made sense.

Instead, like Brittany Spears on another weekend bender, Spanos made a joke of himself and the situation by fiddling some more while the core of Schottenheimer's staff, with Schottenheimer's tacit permission, fled an increasingly deteriorating situation. First it was offensive coordinator Cam Cameron to Miami as head coach. Then Rod Chudzinski, who was the candidate to replace Cameron, jumped to Cleveland as its offensive coordinator. Two more assistants jumped ship and finally it was defensive coordinator Wade Phillips, who got the head coaching job in Dallas.

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With every horse clearly gone from the barn, Spanos finally stepped in to shut the door tightly. Schottenheimer was finally axed, as if he had a chance to survive beyond the 2007-08 season anyway, and San Diego scrambled quickly to find a new head coach before the NFL's Scouting Combine.

Having decided that they were better off without a coach who could at least win in the regular season if not the playoffs, Spanos and Smith decided to turn the paradigm on its head by opting to hire, in Norv Turner, the anti-Marty: a coach who can't win in the regular season either.

From a Cleveland perspective, it's nice to see another franchise in the middle of a meltdown if only to tell us that we are not alone. Cleveland often self-inflicts its wounds by consistently hiring head coaches without NFL experience, preferably lifelong assistants who have been passed over for every job since Paul Brown left the league. Though that path has never proven to be successful, they preserve anyway thinking they can outsmart history. San Diego is essentially doing the same thing by hiring a coach who has failed twice before. Such retreads rarely work. But at least when Dallas hired Bill Parcells or Kansas City hired Dick Vermeil, the two had actually been successful elsewhere. Heck, even Schottenheimer, who was on his fourth team when hired by the Chargers initially, he had a lifetime winning percentage of .621. But Turner is hardly Parcells or Vermeil or even Schottenheimer. In form and substance, he's Marion Campbell redux. That didn't work out too well for the Falcons and it isn't likely to work out too well for the Chargers, either, which is good news for the rest of the NFL as they make their plans for next season.

Yes, Deano, you're doing a heckuva job.