



Sometimes, insomnia pays off.

Around 12:30 this morning, I gave up on sleep for a little while at least, and dragged myself out of bed and down to the computer to surf for some news. (Yes, I consider it insomnia when I am awake at 12:30 on Saturday morning. God, I'm old.) Maybe check for any early NFL free agency reports before moving on to some porn ... um, the latest news on critical geopolitical developments.

So I found myself on the Scout message boards (which have been the genesis of so many friendships here). Into [the Watercooler](#). Lo and behold, there was the news:

“GIVENS SIGNS!”

“ZASTUDIL SIGNS!”

“L.J. SHELTON RESIGNS!”

Damn, I thought, Phil Savage just had himself one hell of a half hour. All of the threads contained links to the Browns' web site, so the stories seemed legit. However, I could not help but wonder how in the world the Browns could have signed two free agents so quickly (Shelton doesn't count, since he would be a re-sign) after the onset of free agency.

Then I looked a little closer at the threads ... they originated around 10:00 to 11:00 Friday evening! Surely the Browns wouldn't report signings before they were even allowed to put ink to paper, right?

As it turned out, it was all a mistake. A resourceful Browns' fan noticed that the news releases on the Browns' site are numbered sequentially. As I write this, the most recent officially released and linked article on the Browns' site can be found at http://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news_room/news/arts/5198.0.html. Don't pay attention to most of that link; check out the 5198 near the end. The previous story's link was identical except for having the number 5197 in the link. The story before that was 5196. Get the picture? Said resourceful fan asked, "I wonder if there's a story at 5199?" Sure enough, there was (the press release announcing the Zastudil "signing"). He kept going, with 5200 revealing the Givens story, and

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the 5201 link discussing Shelton. The trail stopped at 5202. (Don't bother trying those links now, folks. The Browns took them down soon after they discovered their mishap.)

Some may wonder if this is evidence of tampering. I doubt it very much. It's just a matter of writing stories ahead of time, a very, very common practice in the news business. Nowhere is this more true in the sports reporting business. (OK, I'll grant you that "DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN" is about as memorable an example as it gets.) Take a baseball game, for instance. The average story for the next day's paper is pretty much written by the sixth inning. Leave some room to describe the action in the late innings, reserve a few places for the post-game Bull Durham quotes to be sprinkled ... and hope like hell that there aren't any lead changes late in the game. Nothing pisses off a beat writer more than a late come-from-behind win, because it means that the story-in-progress has to be scrapped and rewritten.

So we have established that the Browns apparently had some news releases planned (and they were definitely rough drafts, with numerous typos and XXs for the year/dollar details) for these signings, and that these yet-to-be-released releases were available on the team's official site. Why should this bother us?

Because it is yet another sign of an incompetent organization.

When Al Lerner was awarded the franchise for the Cleveland expansion team, we could have never imagined the trail of gaffes, "oops"-es, and outright snafus that his franchise would leave. Despite seeming to be the ideal owner – which is to say that he was rich, smart, rich, uninterested in meddling with the team's affairs, and rich – here we are, almost a decade later, with the team still mired in the bottom half of the league, and only one playoff appearance to speak of.

But it's more than mere incompetency on the field. It's more than drafting two overall number one picks who may have single-handedly kept the Cleveland Clinic in business. It's more than wasting a bunch of extra picks on the Rahim Abdullahs and Marquis Smiths of the world. It's more than having the Xs and Os in the wrong places.

It's about the Browns doing things that Smart Teams Don't Do.

It's about drafting a player who never plays a down for you because he becomes

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a guest of the State of Washington. (For pistol-whipping his weed dealer, no less.)

It's about squandering a high pick on an underachieving oaf whose legacy will be late hits on quarterbacks and getting busted for a firearms charge.

It's about surrendering an all-time league record for rushing yards in a game, and then having your coach say that your defense actually played pretty well.

It's about having a game in hand, then losing it because of a premature celebration and a completely unnecessary helmet-tossing.

It's about another high draftee "rehabilitating" his injured leg by popping wheelies on a crotch rocket while going way too fast, and chopping off at least another year of his career as a result.

It's about three head coaches, one interim head coach, at least three GMs, and a Bataan Death March of coordinators, all within seven years.

More recently, it's about the latest GM – one who actually seems to have a clue – coming within a hair of losing his job because of a corporate turf war with a suit from Marketing.

Now we have this latest debacle. Like so many of the other gaffes listed above (and the many more that I have successfully repressed from memory), this fiasco was completely preventable. There was no compelling need to write the stories this far ahead of time. If there were, there was certainly no need to store these stories on the site's Web server, making them accessible to anybody who hit the jackpot with the right URL. And even if there were, there definitely was no reason to number the stories sequentially, in an easily identifiable sequence.

The Browns have repeatedly announced that they are not going to confirm free agent visits this offseason. Well, they just let the cat out of the bag on two of their prime targets. Guys, you don't need to confirm player visits; we'll just keep checking your site. Article 5202 can't be too far behind...

The most galling aspect of the Steelers winning the Super Bowl is that ... well ... I really respect them. I hate them, because my Cleveland birthright says I have to, but I think they are a tremendously run organization and (dare I say it?) a model

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for the Browns to follow. When contrasted with the Browns' bumbling, the Steelers' professionalism itches me in a place that I just cannot scratch. Their ownership is solid and has been in place forever; ditto for their GM and coach. They play smart, tough football. They don't kill themselves with stupid mistakes.

And if you go to their site, I'm sure they don't have any available articles announcing the signings of their targeted free agents.

It's just not the kind of thing that a competent team does.