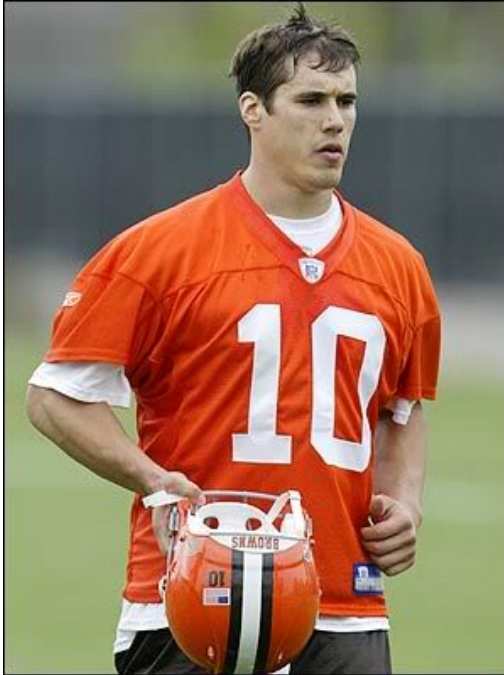


On The Dotted Line

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, August 04 2007 7:00 PM -

Contracts are the talk in Cleveland these days. Fans are upset the Indians gave Eric Wedge a new one, and dismayed that Brady Quinn hasn't signed one. Gary Benz doesn't understand the wild fan overreaction in either case, and pens about it in his latest column for us here at The Cleveland Fan.



The two worst things in life are often not getting what you want and getting what you want. So it is with two seemingly separate but oddly connected figures in Cleveland sports: Eric Wedge and Brady Quinn.

On the surface, there doesn't seem to be much in common. They come from differing sporting paths. Wedge manages a baseball team and Quinn hopes to quarterback a football team. Wedge is almost 40 years of age and, while young for a manager, he still has significantly more miles in his rear view mirror than does the 22 year-old Quinn. But yet each has managed to find their ways into the hearts and minds of Cleveland fans for much the same reason, their contracts. And in much the same way, the fan consternation over each, while singularly different, is every bit as puzzling.

In Wedge's case, there are a good number of fans still upset with Indians GM Mark Shapiro's decision last month to extend Wedge's contract through 2010. As most will recall, this was Wedge's last year under his existing contract, although the Indians held options for the next two years. When Shapiro didn't exercise those options at the beginning of the season, many felt that Wedge was being left to dangle, that this was a make or break year. Shapiro didn't do much to quell that suspicion, either.

But it turned out that Shapiro wasn't all that interested in using this season as the

benchmark for determining Wedge's future. Instead, in mid-July Shapiro essentially exercised the options and added an additional year, meaning that Wedge is now signed through 2010.

At the time, fans were all over talk radio, egged on by the likes of Kenny Roda at WKNR and others, into expressing their abject displeasure with Shapiro's decision. That talk has resurfaced as of late with the Indians recent swoon. While Wedge certainly has his detractors and thus any extension, in their view, was completely unwarranted, most who are just lukewarm on Wedge simply couldn't understand why the issue needed to be dealt with during the season. To their thinking, this season should be a make or break year for Wedge and if the Indians don't make the playoffs, Wedge should be sent packing.

This kind of thinking has a certain amount of surface-level logic. But that's about it. When you scratch below the surface, it's kind of hard to figure why fans even care about it all that much and, to the extent they do, their thinking is almost completely backward.

Like it or not, the Indians under the Dolans are not going to be financed like the Chicago White Sox or the Detroit Tigers. For now and the foreseeable future, it is going to be made up of mostly underpaid younger players, veterans who are on the verge of potential superstardom and a smattering of more seasoned veterans with medical histories. There will be, as there has been, a fair amount of turnover every year. With that kind of built in instability already, the last thing that the franchise needs is instability in either the front office or in the dugout.

The Dolans have been rightly criticized for all manner of action and inaction, but when they extended Shapiro's contract, it was the right move and was done to bring stability to a franchise that, by design, will always be in flux with its players. The same thinking holds true with the decision to extend Wedge. Whatever perceived value there may be in having him manage with his job supposedly on the line, it is completely undercut by the huge distraction of having a manager with an uncertain future sit in the dugout. Having a lame duck manager works no better in baseball than it does in your office. Players being players, meaning they are people first, if they don't think the manager is in it for the long term, they will shut him out. They always do. Always.

Besides, it's simply a fallacy that somehow Wedge will manage different, better, with more passion, take your pick, with his contract status in flux than with it more

certain. Insecurity may be a powerful motivator for some, but that's truer for a player than a manager. No matter how "hard" a manager manages, the players still have to play the game.

Moreover, if the decision on whether Wedge should stay hinges on his performance over what would amount of half a season rather than considering his whole body of work, the Indians would be the least well served of all in that equation. A desperate Wedge might try to eek out an extra inning or two out of Sabathia or Carmona in a given start instead of going to the bullpen, which might actually be the better move. The temptation might be to not rest Victor Martinez until he literally drops. Those moves and others might work well in the short term, maybe, but they could have devastating effects long term. Look no further than to how a desperate Billy Martin managed the Oakland As in 1980 and '81. His decisions to drain the last ounce of effort out of Mike Keough and Matt Norris in order to achieve a short term goal literally ruined their careers and, in the process, set the franchise reeling until Tony LaRussa showed up six years later.

As a final point, what's ultimately the difference anyway? It's not as if Wedge can't be fired before his contract expires. While it can get expensive for an undercapitalized franchise like the Indians to hire and fire managers willy nilly, it will hardly be a devastating blow to the finances of the team if Wedge is let go early either. He doesn't make that much.

Thus, while the fans are fretting over the fact that Wedge has signed a contract, there is at least equal if not more fretting over Quinn's failure to yet sign a contract. That's puzzling as well.

Just Friday morning, Terry Pluto of the Akron Beacon Journal wrote an open letter to Quinn urging him to sign his contract. It was the kind of column that read like a transcript of what most everyone's thinking anyway. But as with Wedge contract situation, this one ultimately leaves me puzzled as well as to why the fans care so much.

In this regard, there is no question that it is better for the Browns and for Quinn that he sign, the sooner the better. But standing back and surveying the landscape, if the Browns are to improve this season, Quinn will be among the least likely reasons why. Stated differently, if the Browns need Quinn at all this season in order to show progress than the franchise is even further in the abyss than originally imagined.

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Everyone already knows the outline on these issues so it hardly bears repeating. But it's always best at times of stress to review the basics.

The chance of a rookie quarterback, even one with the pedigree of Quinn, having an immediate impact is virtually nil and that assumes he didn't miss a minute of practice from the moment he was drafted. Even the players on the worst NFL team were still among the best players on their college teams. To a rookie quarterback, it's like facing an all star team each and every time out. Because the talent level is so significantly different than faced at any level in college, it often seems to the young quarterback like the defense is playing with 20 players on its side of the field. Quinn may be special, but he's not that special as to be immune to the demands of the NFL.

Thus, even if Quinn were the top pick of the draft, and he wasn't, there still was little likelihood he'd start until the season was already irretrievably out of reach. Just from that standpoint, when he signs is not only not worth getting excited about it's actually pretty irrelevant.

While it is entirely understandable, if nonsensical, why the fans get so excited about when a draft pick signs, at least as interesting and as puzzling is the socialistic nature with which everyone looks at these negotiations. Apparently, it's OK to make gobs of money, but even to most fans living in a capitalistic society there still is a limit as to how much is enough. And when it comes to Quinn, apparently that limit is the pay commensurate with his draft position.

Quinn and his agent may be delusional to think that they can bleed more money out of the Browns than Quinn's draft position might otherwise suggest, but it hardly makes either of them a villain for trying. Negotiations are always about leverage and whether they are right or wrong, Quinn and his agent, Tom Condon, believe that they have it over the Browns at the moment. It doesn't help the Browns cause, by the way, for GM Phil Savage to get prickly in the media about the state of the negotiations. Savage would do well to take a page from Condon's notebook and not return the next call Condon makes to him and to otherwise simply make himself unavailable for several days. When Quinn signs will ultimately come down to who is more desperate for it to happen. If it's Quinn, he'll have to learn to get by on a 5-year deal with a shade over \$6 million guaranteed. If it's the Browns, Quinn will have even more in his bank account.

Make no mistake about it: Quinn will sign just as sure as head coach Romeo

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Crennel will look befuddled the next time Braylon Edwards does something stupid. It's not a question of if, but when. And that's the great irony. It really doesn't matter when, particularly at this point. Savage and Browns fans would do well to just relax and let the globe spin a few more times on its axis.