

## The Better Question

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, August 20 2007 7:00 PM -

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The Brady Quinn debate has already taken on a life of its own. Need proof? Scan our front page or our Browns message forum. In Gary Benz's latest column, he says that lost in all this debate is a deeper, darker question: does anyone trust that Browns head coach Romeo Crennel can actually handle the situation appropriately? Gary sure doesn't.



It was probably sometime around Brady Quinn's second completion last Saturday night that the debate began in earnest: what to do with the kid? As the game ended and Saturday night grew into Sunday and Sunday into Monday, the debate has taken on a life of its own. It seems that the only person who hasn't yet weighed in on whether Quinn should start or see significant playing time against Denver this Saturday or Pittsburgh on opening day is the Plain Dealer's Bill Livingston and that's only because he's waiting until everyone else has gone on record first.

But lost in all this debate is a deeper, darker question: does anyone trust that Browns head coach Romeo Crennel can actually handle the situation appropriately? Personally, I do not. And it's not that I'm totally anti-Crennel. As a head coach he makes a fine defensive coordinator. But nothing he has said and done to this point in his career as a head coach even suggests that Crennel can make the right decisions when it comes to the offensive side of the field.

There are any number of examples, of course, but just take a stroll down memory lane, all the way back to last season and how poorly Crennel handled the situation

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with former offensive coordinator Maurice Carthon and you can begin to understand why the chances are virtually nil that the quarterbacking situation now will be handled any better.

With Carthon, there were any number of troubling signs early and often. Carthon in many ways was the football coaching equivalent to Eddie Murray as a hitting instructor. Uncommunicative and prickly, Carthon did precious little to forge a relationship with anyone other than Crennel and it showed both in the results and the comments by the players thereafter.

Maybe it was too much to ask of any coach to control serial loudmouths like Braylon Edwards or Kellen Winslow, Jr. Certainly Crennel hasn't been able to do that fully. And maybe it's just coincidence that two of the least quoted players since the arrival of new offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski are Edwards and Winslow. But what was at least clear is that Edwards and Winslow, to the extent that they respect anyone anyway, had little affection for Carthon and vice versa. Carthon's inability to reach these two strong personalities was as much a problem with the offense as was Carthon's stubborn insistence that the fullback be the focal point.

But rather than recognize that Carthon was, at the very least, about 10 feet in over his head, Crennel continued to back the troubled coordinator in ways that are still puzzling. As most will recall, it wasn't until things were really spinning out of control that Crennel said that he might have to start spending more time with the offense in order to make sure things were going in the right direction. In making this statement, Crennel unwittingly admitted that Carthon, so overmatched and underprepared, basically had the kind of free reign with the offense that he neither earned nor deserved.

Crennel did, however, show that he at least has a better survival instinct than, say, Charlie Manuel, and eventually stopped covering for the inept Carthon and sent him packing. While it didn't save the season, not even close, it did demonstrate that Crennel wasn't willing to put his own job on the line by standing

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behind Carthon, George Bush-like, all results to the contrary notwithstanding.

But it is instructive to go back to that sordid history in order to rightly wonder whether there is any chance that Crennel might handle the quarterback situation any better than he handled last year's debacles. The early signs aren't promising even for the most optimistic among us.

Based on the late play of Derek Anderson last season, it seemed fair that Crennel would open up the competition for the starting job this year. And it likewise seemed fair that Quinn would be part of that mix when he was first drafted and just as fair when Quinn was not after he voluntarily took himself out of that mix by foolishly holding up his own progress over little more than pocket change for the first 11 or so practices of training camp. But since opening up the competition Crennel has seemed mostly paralyzed by indecision, a state not necessarily self-inflicted but a state he's found himself in nevertheless.

Unable to muster any command presence whatsoever, Crennel essentially made himself a national laughingstock by admitting he'd just flip a coin to decide who would start-Charlie Frye or Anderson-against Kansas City in the first preseason game. It's doubtful that's the kind of attention either owner Randy Lerner of GM Phil Savage wanted to see for their struggling franchise. It's understandable why it was a difficult decision for Crennel (or anyone) given Frye and Anderson's performance in camp to this point. But as the head coach, Crennel owns that decision and it's his to make. Leaving it to fate may seem whimsical but it's really cowardly. It's hard to imagine Bill Belichick or Tom Landry or Bill Cowher doing likewise.

Crennel offered the lame excuse that he wanted to see how the quarterbacks would respond to such uncertainty as the reason for flipping the coin. What he really did was ensure that neither quarterback was fully prepared. Though Crennel abandoned his coaching by coin-flipping strategy for the second preseason game, he refused to make his decision on which quarterback would start known either publicly or privately until just before kickoff, again using the

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same &quot;let's see how they respond&quot; excuse. Maybe it was just coincidence that Anderson fumbled the opening snap.

As the Browns enter this week's game against Denver, Crennel has essentially admitted his mistakes and has named Frye as the starter. Crennel told the media at his press conference yesterday &quot;I'm naming him early because I think both guys-not knowing who the starter is going to be and when they'll play, it began to wear on them.&quot; It took Crennel two games to figure that out?

One could fairly argue that the onus is on Frye and Anderson to be ready, irrespective the inane obstacles thrown in their way by the head coach. Perhaps. But adjusting to unforeseen circumstances within a game is one thing, being kept in the dark about your overall status by the head coach is quite another. It doesn't matter whether you are a NFL head coach or the floor supervisor at Wal Mart. Employees respond best when they understand what is and is not expected of them. Keeping them in the dark and then dropping them in the deep end of the pond to see if they can swim to shore is hardly the enlightened view of any high performing organization. Put it this way: if Eric Wedge didn't reveal to his pitchers who would be starting until just before the opening pitch, would it be fair to criticize the starter if he wasn't effective?

One of the key responsibilities of a head coach is to know his personnel. The reason Bill Parcells was such an effective head coach for so many years is that he knew which buttons to push on each player. What worked on Terry Glenn might not work as well on Tony Romo and so on. But Crennel has never been able to grasp that simple concept, even if its execution is deceptively difficult, and his handling thus far of the Frye/Anderson conundrum is Exhibit 672.

It's hard to know whether a different head coach might be able to ring more out of either Frye or Anderson to make any discussion of Quinn's status moot. But it is at least as clear as anything else with the Browns these days that the quarterback quagmire is as much a manifestation of Crennel's abject mishandling of the entire affair as anything else.

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Which is what really makes all this discussion about Quinn foreboding. How much Quinn should play Saturday night or going forward, based simply on his performance last Saturday, is a nice debate but its resolution hinges on an incredibly shaky platform and that is Crennel himself. It's highly unlikely that Crennel will suddenly become adept at handling tricky situations and, whatever else one might think of the troubles with Crennel had with resolving the Carthon situation, that will seem like a day at the casino as compared to what he currently faces right now with Frye, Anderson and Quinn. But given all that's come before it, is there really any chance that Crennel won't roll snake eyes again?