

The Core

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, September 04 2007 7:00 PM -

Phil Savage surprised some Browns fans this past week by coming down off the fence and giving an unsolicited vote of confidence to Romeo Crennel. Savage went on to rave about the team's "solid core group of 35 players" and proclaimed the team was ready to "win a lot of games, not only this year but next year and the year after". In Gary's latest, he examines the core of 35, and also talks about the heightened expectations of the Browns general manager.



As the Browns stand relatively ready to officially begin the 2007 NFL season, there are some, a small number but some nonetheless, who think the Browns have a chance to be one of the more pleasant surprises of the upcoming season.

Most, on the other hand, aren't nearly so bold. But those in this camp do allow that the Browns seem headed in the right direction. Whether or not you find yourself in this camp is not as important as who its number one resident is: Browns GM Phil Savage.

That at least is the message that came through loud and clear at two different points this past weekend.

While discussing the Browns final cuts on Saturday, Savage used the occasion to give an unsolicited vote of confidence to his beleaguered head coach, Romeo Crennel, telling the media that there is no Crennel deathwatch taking place in Berea. He emphatically stated that he is unquestionably a Crennel supporter, stating "I've said it 10 times, he's the right man for the job. There's nobody else out there that could've won more than eight to 12 games over the last two years with the roster we had and circumstances and situations that we've been through." That was a pretty convenient assessment by Savage in that the Browns won 10 games the last two years, which is right in the middle of Savage's overall assessment.

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The unsolicited support of Crennel was reminiscent of the unsolicited endorsement Savage gave of Jamarcus Russell, the first pick of the Oakland Raiders, on draft day and was a reminder that Savage is savvy enough to understand that the platform he occupies can occasionally be an effective bully pulpit. But if Savage is going to use that bully pulpit, he shouldn't be surprised when the media and fans alike seek to hold him accountable for what he says. It comes with the territory he staked out.

While standing squarely with his head coach, Savage raised the bar of expectations, albeit slightly. According to an [article](#) in the Plain Dealer this past Monday, Savage said he believes that the Browns now have sufficient talent to compete with anyone in the league. "We have a solid core group of 35 players," Savage told Mary Kay Cabot. "We have a legitimate NFL roster. It gives us a chance to compete and potentially win a lot of games, not only this year but next year and the year after. I feel good about where we are - about the final 53 [players]."

The most interesting aspect of this assessment is how it conveniently squares with what owner Randy Lerner told the media last March in his yearly round of post-season interviews. In a series of interviews with the Plain Dealer, the Beacon Journal and the Canton Repository, Lerner made it clear that a NFL team needs a core of 35 players to be successful and that, following the signing of free agents Eric Steinbach and Jamal Lewis, the Browns stood at about 18 or 19. (See my summary of these interviews [here](#)).

At that time, Lerner identified the following players as that core group: "I have (Joe) Jurevicius, (Orpheus) Roye, Kellen Winslow, Braylon Edwards, Kamerion Wimbley, Sean Jones, Brodney Pool, Eric [Steinbach], Jamal Lewis, Andra Davis, Charlie Frye, D'Qwell Jackson, Leigh Bodden, Josh Cribbs for special teams certainly if not other, Steve Heiden, and emerging players like Leon Williams, Lawrence Vickers, Jerome Harrison, Travis Wilson."

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Even if accepting Lerner's assessment of core players at face value, which is difficult when it includes Leon Williams and, in particular, Travis Wilson, what that tells us is that somewhere between the draft and the final roster cuts last Saturday, the Browns added 16 or 17 more core players from the assessment Lerner had after last season, assuming Savage's current assessment is correct. The question this begs is exactly who are these new acquisitions? Hard to say since Savage didn't volunteer specifics and the beat reporters from the daily newspapers are so used to having information fed to them that it didn't occur to a one of them to ask a rudimentary follow-up such as, "like who?".

But speculating a bit, certainly Brady Quinn, Joe Thomas and Eric Wright take up three of those slots. It's likely, too, that the Browns consider Antwan Peek and Chaun Thompson among their core. But that leaves another 11 or 12 players on the current roster that now are considered part of the core that weren't last year. Maybe that means that Savage now believes Kevin Shaffer, Hank Fraley, Lennie Friedman, Seth McKinnie and even Ryan Tucker are among the core. Maybe Phil Dawson and Dave Zastudil are now in the club. And even if you include all of them while remembering that they were all on the roster last year, you're still a few players short of defining the core. Even still, the question this also begs is what's changed? It's not like the Browns have played a regular season game between Lerner's assessment in March (which presumably came from Savage in the first place) and Savage's assessment last week.

This is not to come down too hard on Savage, but it is to underscore the conflicting messages this franchise sends and why they make it so difficult to know what to believe anymore.

The most likely scenario is that Savage can't possibly believe that there really is a solid core of 35 players on this franchise. Not to make much out of subjective lists, but in Sports Illustrated this past week, NFL writer Peter King chose his top 500 players (out of approximately 1700 total players) and only eleven Browns made the list. Just on pure averages, the Browns fell about six players short. And in some ways, King's allocation was relatively kind as it included rookies Joe Thomas, Brady Quinn and Eric Wright, none of whom have played a down in the

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NFL. It's hard to fathom that a team that already is underrepresented on any such list could simultaneously have 35 core players.

The thing about all of this is that Savage has never struck me as delusional. As front office executives go, he seems to be the most earnest and forthright. But even assuming that part of what he was doing in describing the current team was trying to re-set the tone of the dialogue in Berea, in doing so didn't he also do the one thing he also criticized the media for doing: put Crennel on the hot seat?

If the Browns do have a solid core of 35 players, then a 9-7 season is not an unreasonable expectation. But truthfully, other than wide-eyed optimists, does anyone believe that a five game improvement is realistic? And if it doesn't happen, is Savage willing to admit what also seems apparent to everyone but those wide-eyed optimists, that Crennel is not the right man for this job?

Savage deserves a fair amount of credit for taking the long view of the franchise and rebuilding it methodically, finally. And outside of his allegiance to Crennel, it's hard to find much fault with how he's gone about doing it. But if the aging Crennel was an awkward fit for a team that lacked talent, and he was, how does he suddenly become a better fit with young and upcoming talent?

In the short term, I suppose Savage deserves the benefit of the doubt on this one because of what he has accomplished to date. But Savage is wrong for trying to divert the media and hence the fans attention from this issue. As long as Crennel continues to make personnel decisions by flipping coins and as long as Crennel continues to look confused and overmatched on the sidelines as the mental mistakes pile up, his status will continue to be debated.

If Savage and Crennel want to have that kind of heat turned down, they'll have to do it themselves.