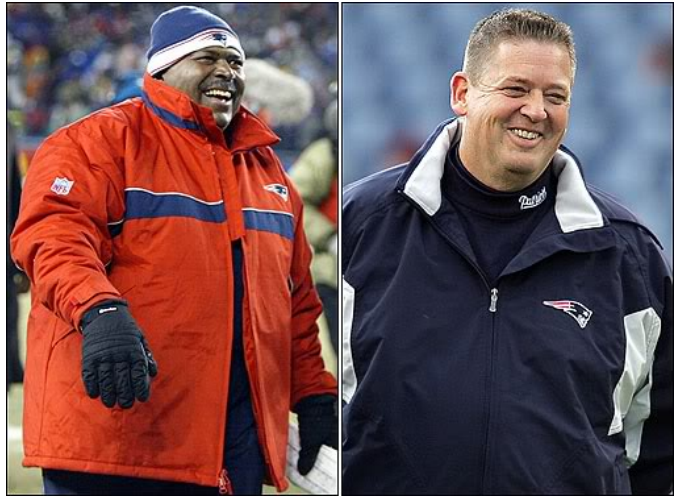


Twin Sons, Different Mothers

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, September 19 2007 7:00 PM -

In Gary's latest, he takes a look at the trial and tribulations of the two star assistant coaches (Romeo Crennel and Charlie Weis) from the Patriot dynasty that won three Super Bowls in four years earlier this decade. Both men had been considered for top jobs in the past, and had also been on teams where coaching openings surfaced ... yet were never promoted. Is there something to this? Gary tackles the subject.



With Notre Dame football, they say you can hear the echoes. The problem these days is that they aren't the echoes of Knute Rockne or the Four Horsemen, but of an implosion of the program that's taking place in South Bend. And at its center is Charlie Weis, essentially the twin brother of a different mother to the Browns' Romeo Crennel.

Though Crennel doesn't bear nearly the same brunt of responsibility for the state of the Browns that Weis does for the sorry state of Notre Dame football, the similarities in their status and the status of what they oversee has to make their former head coach, Bill Belichick quite proud of his progeny.

The struggles Weis is encountering mirror his friend Crennel's struggles with the Browns. It shouldn't go unnoticed, for example, that both coaches jettisoned their opening day starting quarterback. Frye was traded to Seattle but whether or not that was GM Phil Savage's idea or Crennel's may be one of the last remaining mysteries around that particular debacle but is not as relevant as the result. Demetrius Jones, who opened the season behind center for Notre Dame, is off to Northern Illinois after just one game and if it was his idea, let's just say that it wasn't discouraged by Weis.

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Weis is flirting with history at Notre Dame and not in a good way. His 0-3 squad faces the very real possibility of being the first Notre Dame team to start 0-4. Likewise, Crennel, even with the surreal win over the Bengals last Sunday, has more or less flirted with bad history since he got here. The win against the Bengals, for example, was only his second against a division opponent in 14 tries. He also must hold some sort of record for futility on replay challenges.

Beyond these odd parallels, it does raise the issue of why storied programs trusted their fates to lifelong NFL assistants.

In the case of Weis, the overwhelming majority of his career has been spent on someone else's NFL staff. While he did spend a fair amount of time in his early years coaching high school football (his only head coaching experience before Notre Dame) and four years in the late 1980s on the football staff at the University of South Carolina while earning a masters degree, he started in the NFL in 1990 and there he stayed, under first Bill Parcells and then Belichick, in New York and then New England.

Prior to getting the job in Cleveland, Crennel had no head coaching experience at any level. He spent 10 years in college, most of which was with Parcells at Texas Tech, and entered the NFL in 1981, mostly with Parcells and Belichick.

But there is more than just these similarities. In the amount of time each had been in the league as assistants, every NFL franchise had been through at least one head coaching change. Most had been through several. Yet neither was ever hired for the top spot, if they were even ever considered. To put the most positive spin on it possible, every NFL owner and every NFL general manager charged with hiring a head coach repeatedly found someone more qualified than either Weis or Crennel to lead their franchise. At some point it stops being bad luck.

Despite what should have been a red flag to the Notre Dame administration, they hired Weis, who now seems as overmatched as a head coach as does Crennel.

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An offensive guru, Weis' current team is officially the most inept offense in the entire Division I. Beyond being merely inept, they look unprepared, which has been a nagging problem with the Browns under Crennel. As he goes about trying to fix what's wrong, Weis seems clueless where to start. In other words, Notre Dame is suffering the shortcomings that kept Weis from getting a head coaching job for so many years in the first place.

Which is the dilemma the Browns find themselves in today. The fact that Crennel was completely unsuccessful for years in getting a head coaching job wasn't much of a red flag to the Browns. The victory against the Bengals was as nice as it was unexpected. But one victory cannot erase the institutional problems on this team. It can only obscure them until the next time they surface, which is inevitable.

Selecting a head coach may be a bit more art than science, but there is a fair amount of science involved nonetheless. It's not an accident, for example, that the Pittsburgh Steelers have had just three head coaches in the last 38 years. The Browns are on their third head coach just since 1999, fourth if you count Terry Robiski.

One of the reasons, it seems, has to do with the Steelers' approach. Chuck Noll was 37 years old when he was hired. Bill Cowher was 34 years old when he was hired in 1992. Likewise, new head coach Mike Tomlin was 34 years old. After some missteps preceding the hiring of Noll, the Rooney family hit on a formula that has served them, and others, well. Find a young, talented up and comer with enough experience to be respected but not so long in the tooth that he's lost his ability to be flexible. It's a formula that most other NFL franchises have followed, except Cleveland, which has been unable to land on any formula since their return.

Chris Palmer, who was nobody's first choice, was 49 years old when he was hired. Butch Davis was 51. Crennel was 57 years old when he was hired. On that level it seems like the Browns approach begins and ends with checking for gray

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hairs. But digging deeper, there is more, or less, afoot depending on your perspective.

For example, Palmer sort of fell to the Browns when other choices, like Brian Billick, turned down the job. Though not as old as Crennel, Palmer was nevertheless the long-time assistant that had been passed over before for the top spot and hasn't been considered since. Having made the mistake of hiring the bridesmaid lifelong assistant, the Browns changed course, dramatically.

Davis was a bit of a mixed bag, neither completely a college guy nor a NFL guy. He spent several years as a college assistant, mostly with Jimmy Johnson, before following Johnson to Dallas. He then fled the NFL, Charlie Weis style, for the reigns of a high profile college job. But Davis was successful and used that to make a grand entrée back into the NFL as a head coach. Given the leverage that his college success created, the Browns succumbed and turned over the entire football operations to him, a move that Davis was if not ill-suited for than at least completely unprepared for and a move that ultimately kept this franchise from escaping the Dwight Clark years. In the end, the problem with Davis was not as a head coach but as a personnel evaluator. However, keeping him in one role but not the other would have been untenable to Davis. Had that been possible, there is some likelihood he'd still be the coach of this team.

Having made mistakes with two different approaches, the next selection begged for the more tried and true method that the Steelers and others had followed. Inexplicably, however, the Browns decided to re-visit something that has not seemed to work for any franchise, including their own, the elevation of an entrenched assistant. Not so inexplicably, it isn't working again.

Crennel isn't a bad guy. In fact, quite the opposite. If he was a jerk he wouldn't have survived as an assistant for so many years. But the fact that he's a nice guy who is genuinely liked by the players is hardly the most crucial skill necessary for being a successful head coach. Where Crennel continues to fall short is in his ability to present a coherent, organized and prepared team, week after week.

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While it's difficult on many levels to comprehend how a team can look so inept one week and so proficient (at least offensively) the next, such wild swings shouldn't necessarily be a surprise. In fact it defines the issue.

The real trick, and where Parcells and particularly Belichick excel, is bringing a level of consistency and expectation from week to week. You can argue that it's easier to do when there is sufficient talent to deal with, but that's not necessarily the case. Belichick's teams in Cleveland weren't the most gifted and Belichick himself made his share of mistakes. But rarely were those mistakes of preparation or organization. If anything characterized Belichick, the consummate up and comer who got his first NFL head job, not surprisingly, when he was 39, it was and remains an incredible eye for detail and penchant for hyper organization.

These are the areas where both Weis and Crennel fall woefully short. Not surprisingly it's why their teams likewise follow suit and will so for as long as they remain in charge. Get used to it, Notre Dame. Get used to it, Cleveland.