

In Phil We Trust

Written by {ga=mrburns}

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Maybe it's because his performance is compared to the likes of Dwight Clark, Butch Davis, and Carmen Policy, but at this point in time, it sure seems like Phil Savage has done a remarkable job overhauling the Browns roster over the last three off-seasons. In Nick Allburn's latest column, he says Phil has built up some well earned political capital over the last year, and should be trusted to make the right decisions on DA and Romeo.



Maybe it's because his performance is compared to the likes of Dwight Clark, Butch Davis, and Carmen Policy, but at this point in time, it sure seems like Phil Savage has done a remarkable job overhauling the Browns roster over the last three off-seasons. Savage's job is far from finished, but if you compare this roster to that which Savage inherited after Butch Davis' "resignation" during the 2004 season, the differences are astounding. Savage has infused the roster with talent, especially on the offensive side of the football, and the Browns now boast the best offense their fans have seen in at least the last two decades. In a way, Savage has rewarded Browns fans for their [public outcry](#) which ultimately saved his job at the end of the 2005 season.

But last Thursday some unpleasant news broke: the Ravens, the Browns' biggest rival with the exception of the team defeated by Jacksonville on Saturday, had been granted permission to interview Cleveland's offensive coordinator, Rob Chudzinski, as a possible replacement for Brian Billick. While the Browns received vastly superior play on offense from a multitude of positions, Chudzinski was instrumental in the Browns offensive renaissance. To see Chudzinski leave would be a huge psychological blow to the team and the fan base, both of whom are just starting to get used to winning. But to see Chud bolt for Baltimore and to be forced to face him twice each season during the foreseeable future, well, that would simply add insult to injury.

But as he's done in the past, Phil Savage proved himself far more cognizant of the team's priorities than previous regimes, as he moved quickly on Monday to ink Chudzinski to a two-year contract extension that cemented the offensive coordinator's future in Cleveland. In addition to merely keeping Chudzinski from departing C-Town, Savage likely offered him the extension with an eye towards Chud eventually succeeding head coach Romeo Crennel, who will turn 61 this June.

In a Wednesday morning press conference, Savage announced that he would address contract extensions for Derek Anderson, Romeo Crennel, and Jamal Lewis. There's no debating that retaining Lewis for at least one more season would be advantageous, so it won't be discussed in this column. However, Derek Anderson and Romeo Crennel have been lightning rods this season both for positive and negative sentiments, and Savage's comments regarding those two gentlemen are sure to spark some spirited debates.

First, let's take a look at head coach Romeo Crennel. Crennel just finished year number three of a five-year, \$11 million contract signed back in 2005. With two years remaining on his original deal, signing Crennel certainly is not imperative, and letting him coach for one more season under that preexisting contract won't "send the wrong message" or mark him as a "lame duck." But the trend in the NFL, whether it's right or wrong, has been to reward coaches for good seasons with contract extensions.

This Crennel contract situation has sparked a fierce debate among both fans and media members. While some, myself included, don't see Crennel being particularly well-suited to the role of head coach, just as many vehemently defend him. But this state of affairs shouldn't be viewed in that context, because even if Romeo Crennel is the right man for the job, that's not why his contract extension appears imminent.

Crennel's contract extension was probably sealed when Chudzinski signed his extension on Monday. Think about it: an offensive coordinator under contract for

two more years than the *head coach*? It's unheard of. And rather than rock the boat, Savage is going to make the smart move by throwing a bone in Crennel's direction in the form of a contract extension, while at the same time quelling rumors that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" before they can even begin.

A contract extension for Crennel will leave legions of dissatisfied fans grumbling that the Browns will never be rid of the coach, but that's not necessarily accurate. In the event of a future nosedive during which the Browns feel the need to rid themselves of Romeo, such an extension will not deter them from doing so. True, the Browns would be forced to pay out the duration of Crennel's contract, but coach's salaries don't count against the NFL's salary cap, so the only place the Browns would feel the sting would be in owner Randy Lerner's pocketbook.

Plus, Crennel's current salary is relatively inexpensive (\$2.2 million per year, prorated) by NFL head coach's standards, and it's unlikely that Crennel's contract extension will involve an exorbitant boost in yearly salary. There's also precedent here; when Butch Davis "resigned" (he quit before he would be fired) during the disastrous 2004 campaign, Lerner paid Davis the balance of the two-year contract extension he had signed the previous January. Furthermore, Davis was making \$4 million per year when he was fired, about double what Crennel banked this season, so the financial ramifications of sacking Crennel wouldn't be much of a hindrance. On that front, fans can rest easy; if the Browns need to can Crennel, a longer contract won't prohibit such a resolution.

"We have a couple of different options for Derek. We're more apt to want to do something with Derek that would take him beyond the 2008 season. We want to go into next season with both of our quarterbacks, plus Ken Dorsey intact. We want to make sure we stay strong at that position for at least one more year."

-Phil Savage, 01.08.09

On to the other headliner of the Savage press conference: Derek Anderson. Regarding the Browns' incumbent starter at quarterback, Savage stated very decisively that the Browns want to head into next season with both Anderson and Brady Quinn on the roster. Many, myself included, have speculated that the Browns will try to trade either Anderson or Quinn (probably Anderson) this off-season in an attempt to acquire additional picks in this April's NFL Draft. The Browns' problems with their defensive front seven have been well-documented, and adding extra first day draft picks, especially a first rounder (the Browns traded their 2008 first round choice to Dallas to select Quinn), would go a long way in helping the Browns shore up their shaky defense. But Savage said Anderson is staying, right?

I'm not convinced, partially because a vote of confidence in the NFL is so often counterintuitive, and also because Phil Savage has played the smokescreen game before to some critical acclaim. During the 2006 draft, Savage duped Baltimore GM Ozzie Newsome into thinking the Browns would select Haloti Ngata if the Ravens didn't swap picks (Cleveland was #12, Baltimore was #13) with them. Savage's trickery netted the Browns an extra sixth round pick.

Last spring, a scheming Savage led what seemed like the entire football-watching world to believe that the Browns were sweet on both Adrian Peterson and Brady Quinn, and that one of the two would hear his name called with the number three pick. But for weeks, Savage had really been thinking that unless something went haywire during the first two picks or someone blew the Browns away with a trade offer, Wisconsin tackle Joe Thomas was his man. Mission accomplished.

Is Anderson the guy? Frankly, it's difficult to tell. Personally, I'm very lukewarm on DA; he can probably be a serviceable starter for many years and he certainly has a first round arm, but it's his sixth round brain that's worrisome. Outside of a select few in Berea, nobody knows what Savage really thinks of Anderson, or perhaps more importantly, the minimum he would have to receive in a trade to send Anderson elsewhere.

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Savage's opinion of Anderson will eventually be revealed, because at some point this off-season, the Browns will be forced to make a decision regarding the former Oregon State Beaver's future in Cleveland. If nothing else, it should make for good television. Regardless of what happens, Phil Savage built up some well-earned political capital over the last year, and until there's any indication that fans should do otherwise, they should trust Savage's decisions.