

Getting Defensive

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Friday, January 11 2008 7:00 PM -

At their season ending press conference on Wednesday, Phil Savage suggested that "no major changes" would be forthcoming with the coaching staff. Two days later, the team fired defensive coordinator Todd Grantham. In Gary's latest, he says there seems to be more to the story, and despite the reports that seem to intimate that Grantham's termination was Romeo's decision, Gary says this move once again appears to be the handiwork of Phil.



Because it was the end of the season and because he had to say something, Browns general manager Phil Savage conducted his post-season post-mortem on the state of the Cleveland Browns this past Wednesday. Perhaps the most newsworthy item of all was that there really wasn't much to report. For a season that started and ended poorly but had a whole bunch of good stuff in the middle, the relative quiet and stability and all the hope that brings for next season was the message that Savage wanted to convey. That lasted exactly two days.

Though there were plenty of opportunities for general manager Phil Savage to address the issue when he met with the media on Wednesday, the Browns chose instead to wait until Friday to announce that defensive coordinator Todd Grantham had been summoned to head coach Romeo Crennel's office and told to bring his playbook.

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The announcement on the Browns web site of course strongly suggests that the decision rested with Crennel as it solely quotes him saying that "following our discussions after the season, it was decided that it was in the best interests of the organization to move in a different direction." Indeed. Just like it was Crennel's decision to dump accept the resignation of former offensive coordinator Maurice Carthon. And just like it was Crennel's decision to hire Rob Chudzinski.

Given that the Browns already had the worst defense in the league, moving in a different direction was a given. The fact that it is without Grantham is a mild surprise, but that's about it.

What is strange, though, is that Savage didn't take care of this essentially clean-up item prior to trotting himself out in front of the media just two days earlier. At the very least, this suggests that there is much more to the story. However, don't look for Grantham to spill the beans, at least not anytime soon. He signed a two-year contract extension last June and it's likely that his ability to continue to collect on that contract, at least until he gets another job that pays him as much or more, hinges on his being tight-lipped about his parting.

The most likely scenario though is that Grantham and Savage ultimately had a fallout over philosophy, the classic reason for most coaching changes. It would hardly shock if Savage felt that schematically changes had to be made. The defense has clearly deteriorated each year under Grantham. In 2005, it ranked 16th

in the league. Last year, it was 27th

. This year, it finished 30th

, a ranking that is actually aided greatly by the fact that two of the Browns last three games were against the Buffalo Bills and the San Francisco 49ers, two of the worst offenses in the league.

These statistics merely reinforce what was becoming more and more

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apparent on the field. Defensive backs were simply out of position much of the time and thus prone to giving up the big play. But even that paled in comparison to the consistently awful play of the front seven. The Browns were 28th against the rush and no team around them in that category came close to having a winning record. In other words, it's reasonable to conclude that Savage felt that the only thing standing between the Browns and the playoffs was a better defense. That's not completely wrong.

But it wouldn't shock if Grantham felt that the schemes were less of an issue than the injuries, the fact that the most of the aging veterans Savage signed didn't work out and an overall lack of talent that Savage otherwise failed to procure. While Savage was spending all of his time and capital on the offense, the defense once again was patched together with used parts purchased with the change found under the seat cushions. With better players, Grantham likely argued, no one would be questioning his schemes. That's not completely wrong, either.

Given this stalemate of sorts, it probably became clear to Savage in the last day or so that Grantham's likely desire to stay the course and the Browns stated desire to change the course couldn't coexist. The general manager is always going to win in that battle, something Crennel himself learned when he decided not to fall on his sword by protecting Carthon last season. Frankly, it's why Crennel is still with the team.

Another factor that can't be discounted in this matter is the pending contract extension for Crennel. Whether warranted or not, the fact that it is likely to happen, according to Savage, solidifies Crennel's position with the team in the near-term. That doesn't mean that Crennel suddenly became emboldened by his new found status to take a stand against his own hand-picked coordinator. More likely, what it probably means is that Savage essentially used the extension as a way to salve any hurt feelings that Crennel might have over Grantham's firing.

For Grantham, this certainly was a free-fall from the heady days when he was being considered as a head coaching candidate at his alma mater, Michigan State, and even with the Browns if Crennel didn't work out. As for who might replace him, there is speculation that Mel Tucker, Jr., the secondary coach, is a likely choice. But if past is prologue, the Browns will look outside, just as they did at the end of last season when Chudzinski was hired instead of elevating Jeff Davidson to the job, even after Davidson essentially performed it after Carthon was fired allowed to resign. And if past is prologue, again, the decision on who to hire will rest solely with Savage with Crennel acting in a consultative role only.

Don't look for any of this to result in the Browns suddenly dumping the 3-4 defense, Crennel's signature. What you should look for, though, is the Browns to hire someone whom

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they feel can better translate Crennel's defensive philosophy to the players on the field, someone who can ultimately get more out of the likes of Kamerion Wimbley and someone who can, in the end, find a way to get the defense off the field once in awhile.

But even if Savage can indeed find all of that in one person, the job is only half complete. If he fails to turn his attention to fixing this pitiful defense by bringing in better players, then it won't matter even if Savage can find the reincarnation of Buddy Ryan in his prime. The defense won't markedly improve and Browns fans will spend another season pulling out whatever hair remains in their heads while Grantham is off resting somewhere pausing once every two weeks or so to cash another of Randy Lerner's checks, silently smirking.