

Belichick Reconsidered

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, January 22 2008 7:00 PM -

Another Super Bowl, another year of watching from the cheap seats for Browns fans. And it looks like former Browns HC Bill Belichick is going to get himself another title. In Gary's latest, he notes that Belichick is still a reviled figure here in Cleveland, and asks aloud whether this is still a grudge worth holding. Gary also looks back at Bill's time in Cleveland and says that his five year stint here is what helped shape him as a Hall of Fame coach.



Another Super Bowl and another year with the Cleveland Browns watching from the cheap seats.

The frustration of not making the playoffs may still be fresh in the minds of many Browns fans, but just as frustrating, maybe even more so, is the gnawing realization that the New England Patriots and Bill Belichick in particular are headed once again for the Promised Land.

There may not be a statute of limitations on animosity for Browns fans, particularly when it comes to those who so richly deserve it, like Art Modell. But at the same time, it's worth reconsidering the underlying premise, particularly when it comes to Belichick. Is it really a grudge worth holding?

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Modell, certainly, but perhaps on par with the likes of Michael Jordan and John Elway. But unlike Jordan and Elway, whose ultimate success often came at the expense of good but not great Cleveland teams, Belichick's sin, it seems in retrospect, is that he wasn't then the coach he is now. True, certainly, but in the end it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

When Modell hired Belichick, he claimed it would be his last hire ever. Modell could never keep his word, of course, but in this instance he was technically correct. It would be Modell's last head coach hire in Cleveland because Modell then ripped the team from his adopted home town and moved it to Baltimore in exchange for the wad of cash he needed to avoid bankruptcy.

It was hard then to place much stock in just another in a series of Modell's hires over the years. All came with incredibly high praise that eventually soured when Modell's own incompetence as a business man, coupled with some lousy luck in key games, prevented him from winning a Super Bowl with the Browns.

To be fair to Modell in just this one instance, he wasn't wrong about Belichick but, like always with Modell, his timing was off. The attributes Modell saw then, refined over the years, are the reasons Belichick has created a coaching resume of historic and unprecedented proportions.

Ultimately, though, the biggest favor Modell did for Belichick was firing him before he got to Baltimore. It forced Belichick to reassess his life and his goals. Remember, leading up to that termination, Belichick's reputation couldn't have been worse, even if it was mostly self-inflicted. Whatever his merits as a coach at that time, he carried with him an arrogance that belied his modest accomplishments to that point. He was excoriated, not unfairly, by the Cleveland media for being uncommunicative, for being petty, for you name it. In short, the media all but called him a "rat bastard" in print though that was the common thought that came to most people's minds. In fact, it's relatively easy to find folks who believe that Belichick so poisoned the atmosphere in Cleveland that he, as much as Modell, is responsible for the Browns leaving.

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That's always been a hard theory to sell, but it's a popular notion nonetheless. Belichick may have spent Modell's money like a drunk in a liquor store, but Modell facilitated the indulgences. Moreover, Modell's empire, such as it was, was always pretty flimsy anyway. Ultimately, it was a long-term series of bad business moves, Modell's legacy in fact, which cost this town the Browns, not Belichick. In other words, it didn't matter who the coach was or his talents, Modell, as he was fond of saying, had no choice.

That's why it's always been hard to understand the grudge the team's fans continue to harbor against Belichick. After all, this town has seen at least its share of bad coaches in virtually every sport. He's one of the many, not one of the few. But, ah, yes, the Bernie Kosar incident. That's really the nub of the matter isn't it?

In that regard, Belichick's sin was always one of timing not candor. He cut Kosar mid-season in 1993 supposedly because of his "diminishing skills," a phrase that is part of the vernacular of this town, like "the Drive," "the Fumble," and "Mad dog in a meat market." As it turned out, that was a pretty accurate assessment and something Belichick obviously felt going into the season when he signed Vinny Testaverde and benched Kosar well before he finally cut him. The problem, though, is that Belichick's assessment came while Testaverde was injured and seemed more in response to an unstated power struggle between Belichick and Kosar over control for the hearts and minds of the team than any immediate skill issue that had to be addressed.

Wherever one comes out on the whole fiasco, it pretty much cemented Belichick's reputation in Cleveland, something from which he still hasn't recovered. But Cleveland fans have forgiven much more from far less. What's interesting, though, is that this is hardly a grudge that goes both ways. When you can get Belichick to say anything at all about his time in Cleveland, he eventually finds the right words and never trashes the fans, Modell or much else. In other words, Cleveland fans seem to be in some sort of unrequited hate relationship with Belichick.

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This is all unfortunate because those fans holding a grudge are missing an opportunity to really appreciate what a head coach performing at the highest level possible really looks like. It's akin to failing to appreciate the virtuosity of someone like Tiger Woods because he ticked you off when he didn't sign an autograph for your kid at the Bridgestone Invitational at Firestone. Like it or not Cleveland fans, Belichick and Woods are share the same rarified air.

When you take the time to analyze Belichick and his success, it's actually more remarkable what you don't find rather than what you do find. You won't find a smooth talking, aw shucks hale fellow well met. You won't find a guy who runs up and down the sideline high-fiving his players as if he were one. You won't find a coach who has invented some new offensive scheme, like Bill Walsh, nor someone who invented a new approach to defense. Mostly what you don't find is someone who fits the popular, but often inaccurate notion of what it takes to succeed as a head coach.

Instead, his success has come from the attributes that have been taught ever since the first pig was sacrificed for the sake of a ball: Hard work; blocking; tackling; attention to detail and technique; an emphasis on minimizing mistakes; avoiding penalties; not focusing on the last play, but focusing on the next, that sort of mundane thing. Belichick appreciates talent but you can see from his teams that he wins games with a combination of great talents and niche players, all sharing the exact same goal. In his world, desire is every bit as important as talent, maybe more.

Belichick doesn't ask anything more of his players than he's willing to do himself and it shows. He has mastered the intricacies of the salary cap in a way teams can only admire but never seem to be able to duplicate. Other teams may load up on high-priced free agents in order to make a playoff run but usually find themselves in salary cap hell a few years later. Belichick's teams never suffer that same fate. He has an uncanny ability to find talented but undervalued players and isn't afraid to cast aside higher priced players when their cap value exceeds their contributions. It doesn't always make him popular, especially when he cuts ties with a fan favorite, but it helps sustain the success. The ends in this case do justify the means.

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All this is not particularly sexy, it just works. It's why Belichick can sustain turnover in the front office, on his coaching staff and on his roster. Ultimately, his players know that he will put them in the best position to be successful, which is all, really, anyone can ask.

Belichick's amazing run may frustrate Cleveland fans, but this is so much more than giving the devil his due. Cleveland fans may never celebrate his success, but they should know they were instrumental in it. What's made Belichick who he is has at least as much to do with the failures he experienced here, many of which were of his own making, some of which were not, as anything else. The truth is, when he was in Cleveland it just wasn't yet his time.