

The Gambler

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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A consensus seems to be emerging that the flurry of activity at Cleveland Browns central initiated by ringmaster/general manager Phil Savage last week is a bold initiative to win now, whatever the means exactly. Maybe, but one thing that is indisputable is that Savage's moves are the biggest gamble of his career, by a large margin. Gary talks about the potential risks and rewards of Phil Savage's latest acquisitions in his latest ...



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In two very distinct ways, Savage has sacrificed the future for the near-term. He has essentially set ablaze three early round draft picks in the 2008 draft and the various benefits that tend to inure from them if you draft well while at the same time creating potential salary cap hell a few years down the road. That isn't a criticism, just an observation and a reminder that in football, like most other enterprises, there is no potential for growth without some risk.

But whether Savage's maneuvering turns into a growth opportunity or a short-term stroke with long-term pain is far from clear. There are various schools of thought on this, but the conventional wisdom is that you build teams through the draft, not free agency. Paying and often overpaying for someone else's rejects is supposed to be more of a supplement, the final piece or two of a team on the precipice of

going deep in the playoffs. Rarely do you see a team, particularly a successful team, part with draft picks.

Where the Browns fit into that matrix is uncertain. They accelerated their growth last year via both the draft and free agency so they aren't exactly in a total rebuild mode. But with one of worst defenses in the entire league, the Browns don't exactly meet the definition of a successful team quite yet, let alone a Super Bowl contender. That's why most in the league aren't quite sure of what to make of Savage and the Browns at this point.

Perhaps to blunt this inevitable criticism, Browns head coach Romeo Crennel told the media on Monday, if it helps, just think of Quinn as this year's number one pick, Corey Williams as this year's second round pick and Shaun Rogers as this year's third round pick. Dangling that observation in front of someone with a computer and an outlet is like dangling a bottle of hooch in front of Mischa Barton.

Does Crennel really mean to suggest that the Browns would have drafted a quarterback of Quinn's caliber in round one this year given the free agent signing of Derek Anderson? If that's the case, then maybe the Browns should starting crafting their response to the natural follow-up question of why a team with such a lousy front seven decided to burn its first pick on a quarterback instead.

And if Rogers really should be considered the Browns third round pick, then of course that means the Browns had to move up in the round to draft him or else why did they give away a starting cornerback in Leigh Bodden? Rogers must have been a hidden gem or a troubled player whose stock mysteriously dropped. You make the call.

See, the problem with such goofy analogies by a head coach who has enough trouble keeping track of time outs is that they are, well, goofy. But that doesn't necessarily mean that it's not fair to debate his real point: whether the Browns are

as well positioned with their recent acquisitions as they would be had they instead held on to their draft picks.

The real benefit of the two trades, even at the expense of the second and third round picks, is that it let the Browns obtain players with an established NFL resume. Draft picks, even early round ones, are still a crapshoot and will always be until some fail-safe mechanism for evaluating the inherent ambiguities of young athletes is invented.

But the downside of swapping draft picks for existing players is that they are players with an established NFL resume. Williams, for example, was a sixth round pick. He's been an effective defensive tackle for the Packers, certainly more effective than anyone the Browns had on the defensive line last season. He's had seven sacks in each of the last two seasons, which means he can pressure the quarterback and concurrently take the pressure off the secondary. Does his performance warrant being equated with a second round pick in 2008? Not necessarily, but on the other hand it's unlikely that the Browns could obtain that kind of production in 2008 out of its second round pick. The better question may be whether, in four years or less, that mythical second round pick they now don't have could surpass Williams in production.

Rogers is even more of a conundrum. To be charitable, the word out of Detroit is hardly encouraging. Rogers has a history of accomplishment with an equal amount of attitude and defiance. He's overweight and almost seemed to balloon up purposely to make some sort of bizarre point with the Lions management last season. But these were hardly unknowns. Indeed, Crennel admitted as much saying that he felt that there would be enough stabilizing influences inside the Browns locker room to keep Rogers on track. Certainly that can happen, as was the case when both Corey Dillon and Randy Moss went to New England. But Gerard Warren in Denver didn't work out too well, so it isn't always the case that the players can police their own.

Even if both Rogers and Williams have more upside than comparable 2008 draft

picks, Savage's actions on Friday have to be considered as a whole and not piecemeal. This is where the salary cap implications kick in.

Assuming that the NFL and the players ultimately solve their differences with respect to the collective bargaining agreement and a similar salary cap stays in place for the foreseeable future, the signings of Anderson, Williams, Rogers and Stallworth have the potential to linger far longer than any 2008 contributions. While the full details of the contracts of each haven't been disclosed yet, what has been reported with respect to guaranteed money is quite instructive and not just because it will require owner Randy Lerner to dip a bit further into his fortune.

Williams is slated for at least \$16 million in guaranteed money on his six year contract. Stallworth has about \$10 million in guaranteed money on a seven-year contract and Rogers has \$18 million guaranteed on a six year contract. Anderson has somewhere between \$14.5 and 15.5 million in guaranteed money on his three year contract. Since salaries are rarely guaranteed, these dollars likely represent a combination of signing and roster bonuses, perhaps easily achievable performance bonuses as well.

If each played out the term of his contract, the bonus would hit the salary cap on a prorated basis. In the case of Williams, for example, his bonus is worth \$2.66 million of salary cap space each year, based on the length of his current contract. The problem comes if one or more of them don't stick around.

Like most long-term contracts, the salary piece probably ramps up in later years since the guaranteed money is usually paid up front. Thus, when the salary to be paid in later years, coupled with the cap hit for the bonus in that year, begins to exceed the player's value to the team, he'll be cut. Think Orpheus Roye. Heck, think Donte' Stallworth.

When that occurs, not if, the remaining pro-rated share of the bonuses is then accelerated into the year the player is cut. Thus, the team ends up with less

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salary cap to work with even though the player is otherwise gone. It's exactly why former Browns head coach Butch Davis essentially purged the Browns only playoff team several years ago.

These may be problems for another day and another season, but they most certainly are on the horizon. Much can happen between now and then, but the Browns can't be successful each and every year playing this kind of shell game with free agents at the expense of draft choices. At some point, the lack of draft choices this year will become more noticeable in much the same way as if the Browns had squandered the choices with poor decisions. It's what put the Browns in the hole Savage is trying to dig them out of now.

The gamble Savage took may be the final jump the Browns need to become a force in the league, but if Savage wants to keep it that way, there is much more juggling he has to do. If he isn't successful, then another rebuilding program isn't too far in the future for this franchise and Savage can go back to doing what he loves best, scouting. Only it will most certainly be with another team.