

## Banking On Big Men

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Monday, April 21 2008 7:00 PM -

---

Last off-season, Phil Savage acted quickly and decisively to address the team's most glaring weakness - the offensive line. This off-season, Phil used the same blitzkrieg attack to aggressively upgrade the unit most lacking with this year's Browns - the defensive line. Savage dealt away the team's second and third round picks for Corey Williams and Shaun Rogers. Will the strategy pay off? Nick Allburn tackles the topic.



During the 2007 off-season, Phil Savage identified the Browns' most glaring weakness: the offensive line. Savage acted quickly to turn that weakness into a strength, re-signing center Hank Fraley on the eve of free agency, inking stud left guard Eric Steinbach on the first day of the signing period, adding guard Seth McKinney later on, and drafting Joe Thomas with the third overall choice in the Draft, ensuring that the Browns would have one of the premier left tackles in the league well into the next decade. Given how abhorrent Cleveland's line was in 2006, the improvements Savage made for the '07 season were akin to changing water into wine. You have to tip your cap to Savage; the man can pinpoint the flaws in his own team's design, and he does so without worrying about saving face for poor past decisions or giving pet projects time to develop.

This off-season, even the most casual of Browns fans could ascertain the Browns' Achilles' heel, and although criticisms of Derek Anderson do bear validity, it wasn't quarterback play. No, it wasn't the quarterback; it was the defensive front seven, and perhaps even more specifically, the defensive line.

By the time the curtain dropped on the 2007 season it was clear that the Browns had about four and a half passable players on the front seven, all with various degrees of proficiency. There were the (Agent) Smiths on the line (both solid -

## Banking On Big Men

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Monday, April 21 2008 7:00 PM -

---

Shaun looked very good by the end of the season), and at linebacker, D'Qwell Jackson (average), Kamerion Wimbley (very good, not quite excellent), and sometimes Leon Williams (he counts as &quot;half&quot;; flashes of brilliance, but we need to see more of him).

Unfortunately for the Browns Savage's hands were bound by the Browns' lack of a first round Draft choice (dealt away for The Mighty Quinn), and a dearth of quality linemen and linebackers in the free agent pool who could play in the 3-4 scheme. Savage was forced to improvise.

Even with the deck stacked against him, Savage used a blitzkrieg attack to renovate the defense, targeting the defensive line. When the free agency period began at 12:01 AM on February 29th, Savage immediately swapped the Browns' second round draft pick for Green Bay defensive tackle Corey Williams, who was freed from the yoke of the franchise tag. Less than 24 hours later, Savage completed a deal that would send the Browns' third round pick and cornerback Leigh Bodden to Detroit for titanic defensive tackle Shaun Rogers. One day into free agency Savage had acquired two-thirds of his starting defensive line for the upcoming season, and had made it awfully unlikely that the Browns would glean any immediate help from the 2008 NFL Draft. The die had been cast.

The Corey Williams trade has been almost universally praised, and I don't disagree. Williams is young, proven, and should be coming right into his prime. A guy like Williams, who will make an immediate impact, simply isn't available in the second round, although the downside is that the Browns were forced to pay Williams exponentially more than they would a second round choice.

By way of a crude comparison, the Browns chose Eric Wright in last year's draft with the 53<sup>rd</sup> pick. Wright signed a four-year contract worth \$3.165 million, with \$1.5 million guaranteed. The Browns inked Corey Williams to a six-year deal worth \$38 million, with \$16.3 million guaranteed. Savage sent the 56

pick to the Lions in exchange for Williams, so the player that the Browns would have drafted would have likely received compensation similar to Wright's.

The Shaun Rogers deal is the big question mark. The gargantuan nose tackle was a headache for coaches and management in Detroit, clashing with Lions head coach Rod Marinelli. Rogers also dealt with weight problems, and some in

## Banking On Big Men

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Monday, April 21 2008 7:00 PM -

---

Detroit felt that he was increasing his weight as some strange act of defiance. Beyond that, Rogers has a smattering of character question marks, including a four-game suspension in 2006 for violating the NFL's substance abuse policy, and a June 2007 sexual assault accusation by, can you guess it? That's right, a stripper! Note to professional athletes: bad things happen when you go to strip clubs. By trading for Rogers, Savage may have endangered the stable locker room environment that he worked so hard to construct.

The real question is: now that Rogers is out of Detroit, on a winning team, and more than fairly compensated (6 years, \$42 million, \$20 million guaranteed), will he toe the line? Can Rogers stay in shape and deliver a more consistent motor? Can Romeo Crennel consistently motivate him? In a way, Savage gambled just as much on Crennel's ability to connect with and motivate players as he did on Rogers himself. Savage can't afford to be wrong; reworking the contracts of Rogers and Williams, along with re-signing Derek Anderson and signing receiver Donte Stallworth, has erased the Browns' short-term salary cap flexibility, and puts them on a collision course with salary cap hell a few years from now.

The question that looms over all the wheeling and dealing, and also over the Rogers uncertainties, is, "Has enough been done to upgrade the defense as a unit?" There's no doubt that the defensive line has been improved, but it may have been at the expense of the secondary. Starting cornerback Leigh Bodden was shipped to Detroit as part of the Shaun Rogers deal. Bodden may be overrated, and he's certainly injury-prone, but he was still the Browns' best corner and an above-average starter.

Supposedly the Cincinnati Bengals were very close to completing a trade for Rogers, the cost being their third and fifth round draft picks. Some have been displeased that through deductive reasoning, the Browns appear to have valued Leigh Bodden as a fifth round draft pick. Things aren't that simple.

The Bengals have higher picks (number nine in each round) than the Browns (number 22 in each round), but we can account for that using the NFL's [Draft Value Chart](#)

. According to the chart, the value of the picks (numbers 77 and 145) that the Bengals were offering the Lions is 238.5. The third round choice (number 87) the Browns traded to Detroit is worth 155 points, leaving us with a difference of 83.5 points, which is the equivalent of the

number 105 pick, the sixth pick in the fourth round (84 points). Essentially, this trade values Leigh Bodden as a high fourth round pick.

While that might seem like a low price for a starting cornerback, there are other factors in play. With the premium teams place on draft choices, a high fourth rounder is probably on par with Bodden's value. Don't forget that in 2004, Terrell Owens, in his prime one of the best receivers in football, was traded to Baltimore for just a second round pick (the trade was later voided). Last year Willis McGahee, perhaps the best player on the Buffalo Bills' roster, was traded to Baltimore for two third round picks and a seventh rounder. The moral of the story is that NFL teams value draft choices far more than established players.

Let's look at this from the Browns' perspective. Bodden was a good player, but he was ineffective at times last season because he was playing through injuries (high ankle sprain, groin). Throughout his career Bodden has been no stranger to injury. In fact, last season was the first time he played in all 16 games since he became a starter in 2005. It wasn't Bodden's fault, but he just seemed to be one of those fragile guys who always got hurt (see: Hughes, Larry). Plus, the Browns desperately needed linemen. Good 3-4 linemen can be hard to come by and are less prevalent than good cornerbacks.

But the tipping point was probably Bodden's contract demands. Unbeknownst to many, Bodden, apparently [dissatisfied with his current deal](#), wanted to renegotiate his contract with the Browns that ran through 2009. Bodden is slated to make \$1.7 million this season and \$1.8 million in 2009. It remains to be seen whether or not the Lions will renegotiate with Bodden. What now seems most likely is that Bodden went to the Browns with new contract demands; the Browns didn't like what they saw and didn't foresee a reachable compromise, and jettisoned Bodden before it became a distraction. If that's the case, then it's easy to understand why the

Browns traded Bodden, even if you don't agree with it.

Right now, why the Browns traded Bodden isn't what's important. It's a done deal, and we'll learn soon enough whether or not trading Bodden was prudent. At present, the Browns are left with only four legitimate cornerbacks under contract; Daven Holly, Brandon McDonald, Eric Wright, and Kenny Wright. Eazy-E will likely retain his starting job, while Holly and surprising rookie Brandon McDonald will duke it out in training camp to start opposite Wright. Whoever loses out on the second starting job will make a fine third corner for nickel and dime packages, but after corner number three, things get awfully murky on the depth chart.

Kenny Wright didn't turn any heads last season as he did his best to be 2007's version of Ralph Brown. Wright was also [recently arrested](#) for possession of marijuana and evading arrest, leaving his future with the Browns very much in doubt. And frankly, if Wright's having trouble outrunning local cops, he doesn't have what it takes to cover pro receivers.

So the Browns are left with only three reliable corners and lots of uncertainty beyond that. Gary Baxter was re-signed to a one-year contract but given the injuries he's trying to return from, the Browns can't count on him. The Browns may try to move Baxter to safety where he might be more able to hide his lack of the speed, speed he's invariably lost after the operations to repair the patellar tendons he tore early in the 2006 season. Regardless of whether or not Baxter actually sees the field, the Browns still need to add quality depth at cornerback.

This brings us to the linebackers. As far as starters are concerned, I'm comfortable with Kamerion Wimbley, D'Qwell Jackson, and (sometimes) Leon Williams. Basically, the Browns needed to replace Andra Davis and Willie McGinest, both of whom had sub-par seasons and were (especially in McGinest's case) showing signs of aging.

Antwan Peek showed potential as a pass rusher, but was so dogged by nagging foot and ankle problems that it was difficult to fairly evaluate him. Like Baxter, Peek could be a contributor, but is probably too unreliable for the Browns to count on him.

The linebackers were largely ineffective last season, and Phil Savage has thus far done nothing to upgrade at inside backer or find a suitable counterpart for Kamerion Wimbley to play left outside linebacker. We could get into a chicken/egg debate on whether the impotence of the linebackers was a direct result of an awful front three, or if the linebackers themselves simply aren't that skilled, but if Savage heads into the '08 season with the status quo, the upgrades on the defensive line mean that the linebacking corps will be left with no excuses for lackluster play.

Returning to the root of this debate, whether or not the 2008 Browns are a defensive success may rest largely (fat man pun!) on the shoulders of Shaun Rogers. By trading for Rogers, Phil Savage swapped a valuable draft choice, greatly thinned the Browns' considerable depth at cornerback, and sunk big money (six years, \$42 million, \$20 million guaranteed) into a controversial 29-year old player who plays a position that doesn't typically age gracefully.

If Rogers is the dominant force that terrorized the NFC, tore through double teams like tissue paper, and made the Pro Bowl twice, Savage looks like the genius we all hope he is. If not, this season may mirror its predecessor; plenty of points, loads of excitement, an inability to close out games, and reserved seats on the couch come January.