

Talking Points

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, September 23 2008 7:00 PM -

Right now there seems to be an argument of sorts taking place between the Browns' front office and its fans. General manager Phil Savage and Romeo Crennel are constantly reminding everyone of the team's injury situation. The fans, on the other hand, are tired of hearing excuses and demand some answers and some accountability. They've gotten little of either. Gary talks about the crossroads the team finds their season at in his latest.



Sorting through the wreckage of another Cleveland Browns' beat down at the hands of a division rival, one thing that is clear above all else. There is no magic pill, no silver bullet solution to curing what ails them. In almost every way imaginable, the Browns find themselves in the kind of mess it usually takes 8-10 games to create.

Right now there seems to be an argument of sorts taking place between the Browns' front office and its fans. General manager Phil Savage, deploying the team's radio announcers every bit as effectively as Mark Shapiro does with the Indians, has Doug Dieken constantly reminding everyone of the team's injury situation. The fans, on the other hand, are tired of hearing excuses and demand some answers and some accountability. They've gotten little of either.

Instead, Savage and head coach Romeo Crennel keep hammering away on injuries as if they were political talking points that are to be repeated no matter the question. But if Savage is going to take refuge in the injury situation, then he also has to accept responsibility for getting the franchise into this predicament in the first place. Injuries are part of the game and always have been. But why is it that injuries seem to always impact the Browns more than any other team? Why is it that some teams can overcome it while others, like the Browns, wallow in it?

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In the past, I've applauded the fact that Savage hasn't sat on his hands like some other general managers in this town, hoping against hope that another year of seasoning will suddenly make mediocre players better. He has worked hard to upgrade the starting talent. Usually, though, when a team is that active, certain compromises necessarily are made.

Savage has made two significant compromises. First, by trading draft picks for veterans, he traded the future. Second, he compromised the team's depth by filling out his roster with a bunch of undrafted free agents in order to make a salary cap laden with those veteran salaries work. Of those two, the one that is hurting the team the most right now is the lack of depth. Head coach Romeo Crennel can say that changes will be made in the wake of Sunday's loss to the Ravens, but it's an empty threat. Right now the Browns already are using a healthy dose of their second string because of injuries and the fans are finding out exactly why the injuries to the starters hurt so much. The cupboard is bare and has been for the better part of going on 10 years.

As general manager, Savage is in charge of the football side of the team's operations. Not only has he failed to procure the kind of depth a team needs during a 16-game schedule, but he's also failed to build a training staff that can keep the players healthy.

Football is a physical game. But far too many of the Browns' injuries are non-contact related strains and pulls. Receiver Donte' Stallworth's injured quadriceps can be lumped in with all of the other pulled hamstrings and such that have caused too many players to miss too many games for too many seasons. Either the Browns don't have the right training staff or their training staff is creating an environment that breeds injuries through overwork and overuse. Maybe it's something else entirely. But there are answers to be had and continuing to chalk it up to bad luck is simply perpetuating the loser's mentality that Savage frequently decries. It's not the fans feeding that beast. It's Savage and Crennel.

There is also the nagging suspicion that some of the Browns' players are just plain

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soft. Anyone who has watched pre-game warm-ups knows that it barely qualifies as physical activity. Players stretch a little, walk through a few plays and formations, just to get the juices flowing. Yet Stallworth has been out for three games now because of an injury suffered during the pregame? Seriously?

No one's claiming that Stallworth isn't injured. What is being questioned is the extent. If nothing else, it's at least fair to say that Stallworth's pain threshold is just a wee bit south of, say, Kellen Winslow's. At this point, it almost doesn't matter if he ever suits up for a regular season game anyway. He'll never be fully embraced until fans are convinced that at the first sign of war he doesn't turn himself in as a hostage. I'd say the jury's still out on that one but since he's never actually played for the Browns in the regular season, it's kind of hard to even convene a jury. At least next year it will be a problem for his fifth team in five seasons, not the Browns.

The other problem with continuing to beat the injury drum is that it ends up being a cheap ploy to avoid addressing the team's other multi-faceted problems. Irrespective of how injuries may be impacting the team's depth, they surely aren't the reason for the mindless, drive-killing penalties that are this team's stock in trade. This is a team that lacks focus and discipline and this burden falls squarely on the head coach. Undoubtedly Crennel has pointed out these problems to the players. But just as surely he hasn't attached any consequences to noncompliance. Each week the same mistakes keep getting made as if it was the first time it ever happened. If you start work at 8 a.m. and keep showing up at 8:15 and you don't get disciplined, what time do you think you'll show up tomorrow?

This point is endemic of the team's entire approach. This team lacks core-level leadership that will hold the players accountable for their repeated failures. Jamal Lewis can publicly say the team's play is pathetic but that hardly goes far enough. Fans are more interested in him grabbing Braylon Edwards by the scruff of his neck behind the scenes and threatening him to within an inch of his life if he doesn't start holding on to the damn ball.

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But don't look for that to happen any more than you should look for the Browns to suddenly rip off a string of victories and get back into the playoff hunt. A team lacking basic leadership and discipline at the top can't expect it to miraculously grow from within no matter its injury situation. The fact of the matter is that this team wasn't prepared to open the season and looks no better prepared three weeks in. That isn't going to suddenly change with Crennel in charge and isn't going to change simply because Stallworth decides that his tender quadriceps has healed enough for fans to witness all that scary speed.