

## The Far Bigger Problem

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, October 28 2008 7:00 PM -

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In a week filled with one bizarre revelation after another regarding the Cleveland Browns, Gary says there was only one real conclusion worth drawing about the whole mess. That Kellen Winslow is far less of a problem than Phil Savage, the team's general manager. Gary isn't too keen on how Phil handled the whole Winslow situation, and writes about it in his latest column.

In a week filled with one bizarre revelation after another regarding the Cleveland Browns, there was only one real conclusion worth drawing about the whole mess, Kellen Winslow is far less of a problem than Phil Savage, the team's general manager.

When Winslow decided to rip the scab off of a wound that was clearly festering about his contacting another staph infection, at least two prominent sports writers in this town, Terry Pluto and Patrick McManamon, were quick to choose sides without any particular need for facts. Pluto concluded that this was simply Winslow seeing an opportunity to press his claims for a new contract.

McManamon simply said that Winslow was such a disruptive force, it was time for the Browns to set him free.

At least Pluto admitted he was wrong.

The case against Winslow was never easily made in the first place. He's an emotional player who has had his share of adversity in his relatively brief career, much self-inflicted.

But what's not been articulated only concluded is exactly why he's a "net minus" for the Browns.

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By all accounts, Winslow plays well and plays injured.

No one questions that he has a high pain threshold.

He can actually catch.

Savage, on the other hand, is building a tidy pile of issues in his own right that suggests that as a general manager, he makes an awfully good scout. Like Winslow, Savage is emotional.

In fact, given the difference between Savage's job and Winslow's, it's a fair conclusion to draw that Savage has had far more public displays of inappropriate emotion.

Start with Monday's 29-second press conference and work backwards. On Monday, Savage interrupted head coach Romeo Crennel's scheduled press conference to deliver a rather terse statement that Winslow only had a staph infection, nothing more.

Got it?

While there is no way of knowing for sure, it seemed apparent that Savage had been ordered to step out in front of the media by his boss, owner Randy Lerner, in order to clear up the confusion he added on Sunday to a matter that had supposedly been resolved on Saturday.

He spit out his words defiantly, like a kid whose parent had told him to go apologize to his sister for calling her a name.

Of course Savage wouldn't have had to put himself in that position in the first place if he had just let well enough alone on Sunday. Instead, when asked to comment on the resolution of the suspension, Savage decided to muddy the waters further by suggesting that there was far more to the story still and that perhaps the reporters ought to talk with Winslow if they were really interested in getting full disclosure on the nature of Winslow's illness.

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In dropping that turd in the punchbowl, Savage came off mostly as a sore loser for having to rescind a suspension that in retrospect should never have been issued in the first place. Rather than simply say that matter was resolved amicably, he instead continued to try and justify it, when a more politic general manager would have simply smiled and moved on.

Of course Savage wouldn't have even had to put himself in that position if he had not been so emotional mid-week to the local flagship radio station in explaining why an out-of-control Winslow just had to be stopped, for the good of the team. It might have been useful for Savage to have first gathered all of the facts and not just the ones he felt supported a rather harsh response to a clearly emotional and sensitive issue.

What's very evident is that the real sore point for Savage is that it wasn't so much that the Winslow grievance was resolved as it was that the Browns' capitulated. They had to.

As the facts revealed, a member of the team's public relations staff, a group that reports up to Savage, did indeed tell Winslow not to disclose the nature of his illness or else face Savage's wrath.

In other words, Winslow was right, Savage was wrong and that's giving Savage the benefit of the doubt that he really didn't know what his p.r. staff was doing. But if you to see this all as some sort of conspiracy engineered by Savage to take the heat off a team that was falling apart, then remember that Savage's reaction to Winslow's initial statements exactly tracked the text messages that the p.r. staff sent Winslow in the first place.

Savage did react angrily at Winslow's comments, to the point of actually suspending Winslow for a week.

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What the Browns really have in Savage is an incredibly emotional and incredibly thin-skinned general manager. He's had several other public outbursts, mostly tied to his visible irritation at either members of the media or the fans who dare question the direction of the franchise. He treats any legitimate question about his decisions in a dismissive, petulant manner. He doesn't like to be second guessed and he doesn't play well with others. It's in this context that one now wonders what really did happen in that little front office drama Savage had with former team president John Collins.

That Savage would treat one of his marquee players in such a shabby manner, particularly when it was so disproportionate to the actions by that player, doesn't speak well for his suitability as the team's most visible front office representative. That Savage engineered this entire mess when he didn't have all the facts and then mostly disappeared leaving Crennel to face the media says something about Savage's own leadership skills.

Crennel has enough trouble just keeping the lid on players like Braylon Edwards.

The last thing he needs is to play Darren Stevens to Savage's Larry Tate.

To this point, I have been mostly supportive of Savage. While I disagreed with some of his personnel decisions, I at least admired his willingness to take them on. He clearly saw the need to make step changes with this team and hasn't been afraid to make that happen, even at the expense of making a mistake or two.

But Savage's biggest Achilles heel has always been his overwhelming need to make himself look like the smartest guy in the room. As long as the team is winning and headed in the right direction, a whole host of sins are easy to forgive.

But the erratic and overly emotional behavior he displayed this past week frankly makes any decisions he makes going forward that much more suspect.

If the Browns are in the tie-severing business anytime soon, far better to look first at Savage before getting to one of the few guys on this team that can actually

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