

The Roads To Ruin

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, November 25 2008 7:00 PM -

In Gary's latest, he says that the Browns' latest collapse is really the convergence of three separate roads leading to Berea. And that the first road is that laid by Browns' owner Randy Lerner ... who embodies the definition of reluctant owner. And that ridding this team of just Savage and Crennel isn't going to work unless Lerner dramatically alters his approach to this prized asset. Gary also hits on Lerner's press conference from today in laying out The Roads To Ruin.



The only surprise about Sunday's Cleveland Browns/Houston Texans game is that some Cleveland fans still have the capacity to be surprised. Anyone who didn't see this meltdown coming is hopelessly naïve. Week after week of controversy overlaying an organization that's already among the most dysfunctional in sports eventually will take its toll. It always does.

Think of the Browns organization as a building constructed with cheap materials that don't meet code. That it would eventually collapse becomes somewhat inevitable. It just happened to be this past Sunday. It could have been last week or next week. The only hope is that no one is inside when it happens. Here, though, there were plenty inside, including all of the fans who have stood by this team with their time, their energy and their money. Even with the economy and stock market as it's been lately, they would have been far better off investing in the S&P 500 than the Browns.

As it stands, the Browns' collapse is really the convergence of three separate roads leading to Berea. The first road is that laid by Browns' owner Randy Lerner who embodies the definition of reluctant owner. It's no secret, in fact, that owning the Browns wasn't something that Lerner necessarily aspired to do in the first

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place. He inherited the team when his father, who wanted nothing more than to own the team, died prematurely. Since then, Lerner has pretty much put the fate of the franchise in the hands of a variety of individuals, none of which has ever fully served him well. Being the reluctant owner, though, he hasn't seemed particularly bothered by that.

But Lerner's shortcomings as an owner have now accelerated to the point where his fingerprints were all over Sunday's disaster, even from whatever perch he watched it take place. Though he spoke to the media on Tuesday, it seemed it was mostly to let the fans know that he is not selling the team. Great. Substantively he said nothing more noteworthy than there will not be any changes until after the season. Oh yea, he's just sick about the whole thing, just like the fans. It was hardly enough to quell the unrest let alone alter his status as an absentee landlord.

By staying away, by failing to set a tone or direction, by being mostly invisible at a time when an owner is needed most, Lerner has morphed his style from one of deference to one of cowardice. It's one thing to let your "football people" run the show. It's another to hide from the white hot glare of scrutiny yourself when all hell is breaking loose and you're the only one that can truly restore order. And in case he didn't notice, all hell is breaking loose as the screams of "Cowher, Cowher" at the end of Sunday's game will attest.

Lerner's near total abdication helped pave the way for the second road that led to this disaster, the one occupied by general manager Phil Savage. Only in Savage's world does a plausible rationalization exist by which his bizarre and unprofessional conduct this season hasn't set the exact wrong tone and direction for a franchise in need of a guiding light.

Too many in this town seem to want to give Savage at least a partial pass because of his talent evaluation abilities. No one is questioning those skills. Savage has significantly upgraded the roster. But it's that upgrade, actually, which highlights his overwhelming flaws.

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It's neither Savage's title nor role to be the team's head scout. But that's truly how he functions and where he's most comfortable. Give him his tweed blazer, a worn baseball cap, a stopwatch and a ticket to Mobile, Alabama to scout the Senior Bowl and Savage is in high heaven. Get him talking about 40-yard dash times and vertical leaps and Savage literally comes alive. But ask him to skillfully handle the more mundane matters, whether it's corralling the public relations interns or calming the legitimate medical concerns of egomaniacal tight ends, and Savage enters a twilight zone of bizarre decisions and petty recriminations. And yet still too many, including his boss, want to act as if there is no relationship between those acts and the product on the field.

This isn't even a question of letting Savage grow into a job he's been in now for almost four years. By this point his skill set is established and his ability to improve limited. If you don't think either of those is true consider how poorly Savage has handled the administrative functions of his job just this season. On a weekly basis one issue or another seems to blow up instead of getting handled behind the scenes. This is even before you get to his bizarre and profane email to a fan that got under his rather paper-thin skin. Put it this way, after considering his full body of work after these four years, if this were an election do you think Savage would ever get voted another four-year term, assuming the fans, the media and the players all had a say?

It was Savage, of course, who in turn paved the way for the third road into Berea, the one laid by Savage's hand-picked head coach, Romeo Crennel. You just know it must be getting to the end for Crennel when the Plain Dealer's Bill Livingston finally acknowledges what has been clear to most others for months, if not years, but I digress.

It's not as if it's been a State secret that Crennel is in over his head and has been since day one. There's a reason he was a 25-year career assistant that never secured the top prize until it dawned on the collective brains of former team president John Collins (another Lerner hiring disaster), Savage and Lerner thought that there apparently was something in Crennel that every other team didn't see. All his hiring has done is prove that they never really knew the difference between reality and a mirage.

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In looking back, one now wonders how much due diligence Savage, Collins and Lerner really put into the decision. Crennel was first interviewed for the job while the New England Patriots were in the midst of their Super Bowl run in 2005. From ESPN.com : "On Jan. 7, Browns owner Randy Lerner, team president John Collins and general manager Phil Savage met with Crennel in Boston for his interview. It didn't take them long to realize he was their man. 'There was sort of an aura about him,' Collins said. 'We were all shooting each other looks like, this is the guy.'" From the sound of it, it doesn't look like the three really looked at anyone else.

The question is, why? The Patriots certainly had a great defense and Crennel was known as a good defensive coordinator, but didn't it occur to them to look beyond just those facts and figure out why Crennel never landed anywhere else, particularly when other teams were busy signing far younger and less experienced coaches?

That's all water under the bridge at this point, but it does provide some insight into the decision-making that's been going on in Berea. It's been like that ever since. You can almost set your watch by it.

But far more damning when it comes to Crennel is that every one of his teams, and that includes last year's 10-6 version, has been plagued by the same sorts of issues, all of which point right back to him. His teams are always among the most penalized and many of those are false starts, game delays and other similar infractions that speak to a lack of focus. There are persistent discipline problems that never seem to get fully addressed. Too often there is any lack of coherence to what the team is trying to accomplish from week to week. Are the Browns a running team or a passing team? Are they a pressure defense or a read or react? The only consistent philosophy is that they have none.

Where Crennel does get some credit, certainly more than either Savage or Lerner, is the fact that he's a stand-up guy and always has been. It's precisely where his two superiors suffer most. Crennel at least understands that suffering the slings

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and arrows comes with the territory. His shortcomings as a head coach are voluminous, but his integrity and character are unmatched in the organization. It would be great, indeed preferable, if Crennel had the coaching ability to match his admirable personal characteristics. But since he's the team's head coach and not its ethics officer, his abundance of character is not enough to save his job.

It's been suggested that the only way to really fix this franchise is to blow up each of the three roads and start from scratch with new ones. That may be a little dramatic since two out of three may work just as well, especially since Lerner has no plans on selling. But ridding this team of just Savage and Crennel isn't going to work unless Lerner dramatically alters his approach to this prized asset. To this point, his methodology has been as flawed as it's been unsuccessful. In that context, simply turning the reigns over to Bill Cowher alone or anyone else for that matter isn't going to get it done. Lerner will find a way to curb his instincts and muster the courage to actually take the reigns of a franchise that is wreaking far more havoc at this point than a mere runaway train.