

Don't Know Much About History

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, December 01 2008 7:00 PM -

As the days slowly pass in Berea and the sun begins to set on the first and likely only head coaching job Romeo Crennel will ever have, Cleveland Browns fans find themselves once again in achingly familiar territory. Now four years removed from Butch Davis leaving, the Browns will once again change coaches. Has anything been learned in the interim? The ability to answer that question honestly and react appropriately is the task owner Randy Lerner has if he's ever going to learn from history or finds himself doomed to repeat it.



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Just four years ago, former Browns' head coach Butch Davis up and quit with five games remaining in the season. It was a spectacular, season-and-a-half self-inflicted crash that hardly seemed possible after Davis had led the Browns to still their only playoff appearance since the team's return in 1999.

It also left the franchise in almost complete disrepair.

Four years hence another season lies in tatters and another head coach, at least, is about to be sacrificed. Has anything been learned in the interim? The ability to answer that question honestly and react appropriately is the task owner Randy Lerner has if he's ever going to learn from history or finds himself doomed to repeat it.

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To find the truth, Lerner must take a painful trip back down memory lane. It may not be necessary for him to pour over all the gritty details as there are enough headlines to allow him to capture the mood and the flavor, for him to truly be able to grasp the essence of the team's last meltdown, put it into context with the present problems and then find the right path forward.

When Lerner takes that look back, here's what he'll see. The post-expansion Browns' first head coach, Chris Palmer, never really had a chance.

The NFL stacked the odds against the Browns from the outset by waiting so long to name an owner that it really didn't matter who was named that first head coach.

Measured in that context, it was a miracle the Browns were able to field a team.

Parting ways with Palmer, who was never really head coach material anyway, was inevitable. If anything it probably was right to pull the plug too early than too later.

That firing and the rumors about who might be the new head coach-Bob Stoops? Butch Davis? Someone even better?-gave fans a reason to look forward and forget the incredibly awful product that had been on the field the previous two seasons.

When the white puff of smoke emerged from chimney of Carmen Policy's office fireplace, it was Davis, fresh from resurrecting the University of Miami football program, who was the anointed savior. In his first season with the Browns, Davis took a team that the previous season had won just three games and more than doubled the win total, going 7-9, no small feat.

The next season, Davis delivered even more, leading the team to a 9-7 record and a playoff game against Pittsburgh that was as thrilling as it was disappointing.

It was the game where Kelly Holcomb, subbing for an injured Tim Couch, threw for over 400 yards.

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It was the first real hope that Browns fans had felt in years. Thus much was expected when the Browns entered the 2003 season.

Fans weren't crazily chanting "Super Bowl" at the team's training camp, but they certainly felt that even better days were ahead.

But as it happens so often in Cleveland sports, the light at the end of the tunnel was a convoy of semis barreling down the turnpike at 100 miles an hour.

Even before the 2003 season started, there was plenty of controversy. Essentially acting as his own general manager, Davis took a hatchet to the veterans on his team in a salary-cap purge from which, ultimately, the team couldn't recover.

Then Davis couldn't commit to a quarterback and a string of injuries laid waste to whatever plans were initially made.

Suddenly a team that seemed on the cusp was regressed dramatically, ending the season with a record of 5-11.

Sound familiar?

But because so much had been invested in Davis, Lerner didn't feel a need to rein him in. If anything he gave him even more slack, signing him to a contract extension and allowing him to essentially orchestrate some high profile resignations in the front office during the offseason that further increased his power base and removed most checks and balances. What happened next was inevitable.

The season didn't careen off course immediately.

Indeed, the Browns were actually 3-3 at one point.

But on consecutive weekends they lost to Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, the New York Jets and Cincinnati. With each loss came a new set of problems that Davis, acting both as general manager and head coach, couldn't handle.

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It was the loss to Cincinnati, by an almost unheard of 58-48, which sealed Davis' fate. A franchise that was merely struggling at 3-3 a month ago was now waist deep in chaos. Davis the coach was fighting with Davis, the general manager's, hand-picked quarterback, Jeff Garcia. Gerard Warren was making more noise off the field than on it and there were a variety of other assorted issues from week to week, much like this season, that were distracting the players from the real task at hand.

Much of these issues were an outgrowth of Davis' power grab and the dismantling of a viable internal support system. There was nowhere for Davis to turn to for help, certainly not to an absentee owner who believes every problem can be solved by merely writing a check.

Under mounting pressure from within and outside the organization, Davis quit two days after that Cincinnati loss.

When Davis quit, a franchise that was in chaos had essentially collapsed. Much like he did last week, the events surrounding Davis' departure forced Lerner to take public responsibility for the debacle followed by the inevitable promise to bring about the structural changes that he felt were needed to make the franchise successful.

In making those vows, Lerner said he wanted to emulate the New England Patriots and Philadelphia Eagles organizations, which featured a strong general manager and a strong head coach.

That led, of course, to the hiring first of Phil Savage and then Crennel.

But in making those vows, all Lerner really did was copy their org charts and insert inferior personnel in the appropriate boxes. What Lerner didn't do was take a broader and deeper look to understand why those organizations, and others, have been successful and why others have not.

In one sense, Lerner was correct that the superstar head coach serving as his

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own general manager was a flawed approach. Davis exemplified the reasons why. But Lerner failed to grasp one key concept. A successful organization is always about more than the transient occupants of even the highest level jobs.

It's about standing for something.

Simply copying the New England org chart isn't going to suddenly turn a franchise into a Super Bowl contender.

There has to be an underlying objective that defines what this organization, this team stands for and what it does not.

As the saying goes, if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there.

That's exactly where this team finds itself, on any road and every road with no fixed destination in mind. It's abundantly clear that Savage possesses neither the ability nor the inclination to set a course and Crennel never had the authority.

Maybe it was always unfair to expect much of that from either of them anyway, a rookie general manager and a rookie head coach.

It's a task that really falls squarely to Lerner and to this point it's the key responsibility he's abdicated by closing himself off from the team.

Lerner can spend all the time in the world looking for the next Scott Pioli or the next Bill Belichick believing that is the key. He can give Savage a little more time to mature and help him find a head coach that is more up to the task.

But in the end it will all be for naught, again, until Lerner defines what he and this team really are about.

He didn't do it when Davis quit and he didn't do it last week either.

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And until that happens, all what follows from this point forward will amount to just more chair shuffling on the deck of the Titanic with the next sinking to come sometime around November, 2012.