

Cleaning House - Part II

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, December 28 2008 7:00 PM -

The other shoe dropped, as expected, this morning as Cleveland Browns' owner Randy Lerner fired head coach Romeo Crennel. It capped off a busy weekend by Lerner in which he began yet another extreme makeover for a franchise that doesn't need a makeover but a total exorcism. Gary weighed in this morning with his thoughts on the Savage firing. And this afternoon, he gives our readers his thoughts on the Romeo canning as well as the new coach search, which is already well underway.



The other shoe dropped, as expected, Monday as Cleveland Browns' owner Randy Lerner fired head coach Romeo Crennel. It capped off a busy weekend by Lerner in which he began yet another extreme makeover for a franchise that doesn't need a makeover but a total exorcism.

In typical Lerner fashion he delivered the news in his usual media-unfriendly way, without the benefit of a microphone or a camera. Perhaps he doesn't see the irony in his explaining how his prior general manager lacked leadership skills even as he was avoiding any attempt at accountability himself in front of a media and a fan base that deserved better.

Reaching the decision to fire Crennel was probably as easy as it was difficult for Lerner. Crennel, reared under a military background, is a serious-minded individual with little tolerance for either giving or accepting excuses. He was a plain-talking straight-talking individual, almost the complete opposite of his full time predecessor, Butch Davis.

But in the end, all of the admirable personal traits couldn't translate into the one thing he was hired to do-win football games.

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In that regard, Crennel was wildly unsuccessful. In four years, his teams went 24-40. Oddly, that's at best only about a third of the story.

Crennel took over a team that wasn't very good to begin with.

Former general manager Phil Savage helped change that for the positive in some respects over Crennel's tenure but even under the best of circumstances the team that got embarrassed Sunday against the Pittsburgh Steelers is still several players away from being any sort of legitimate playoff threat.

There was never enough polish Crennel or anyone could apply to this jalopy.

That being said, there still is no excuse for how Crennel's teams performed over the years. Too many times his teams took the field unprepared and then proceeded to play that way, making one mental mistake after another.

The number of false starts, delays of game, offensive interference penalties and the like reached near legendary status.

Beyond the lack of mental focus also was the fact that Crennel's players often seemed wildly out of position in every phase of the game.

Much of the problem in that regard stemmed from the simple fact that as a head coach Crennel was far too deferential to his assistant coaches. As a former lifelong assistant, Crennel knew almost better than anyone the inherent frustrations of those jobs and at times seemed more intent on satisfying the egos of his assistants than in making the hard decisions that a boss sometimes has to make. As a result, the team didn't just lack an identity it lacked basic direction.

Crennel's problem with managing the intricacies of a game was taking on legendary status itself. Hardly a week went by, particularly this season, when Crennel didn't make at least one highly questionable decision, usually on when to kick a field goal. But there were others, like the infamous

coin flip to figure out a starting preseason quarterback.

Like so many players with ability that can never make it in the NFL, the game simply never slowed down for Crennel.

Adding to the mix was the fact that Crennel also was stubborn to a fault. He acted decisive when reasoned judgment based on changed circumstances was called for.

No more was this exemplified by Crennel's decision to hang on to former offensive coordinator Maurice Carthon well past the time it was obvious to everyone else that Carthon was overmatched for the job and not respected by the players.

It was Savage in fact who had to step in and force Crennel to part with Carthon.

But there are litanies of other examples that illustrate the point just as well, the begrudging decision to switch from Derek Anderson to Brady Quinn comes most immediately to mind.

But of all the various issues that marked the Crennel era in Cleveland, the biggest mystery of all still remains why the players simply didn't play better for him. As the Crennel watch began in earnest several weeks ago, it seemed almost sport for the lazy mainstream media to chat up this player or that and ask him how he felt about Crennel.

To a man they professed their undying love and gratitude.

As a group they shouldered the blame for the season's outcome while singing the praises of Crennel as a head coach.

Why, then, didn't they simply channel those words into action on the field? It was almost laughable to hear Braylon Edwards talk about Crennel as a father figure and mentor.

It was Edwards, after all, who ignored Crennel's "advice" not to attend

the Ohio State-Michigan game two seasons ago.

It was Edwards, after all, who lived large and played small even though Crennel was telling him that he had that equation backwards.

But Edwards, for all his misdeeds, was hardly the only player who danced to his own beat under Crennel. The list of players who translated their respect for Crennel into passion and professionalism on the field starts and ends with Josh Cribbs and Jamal Lewis. The rest of the team may not have mailed it in from week to week but they certainly did from time to time.

That this day would eventually come is hardly a revelation. But it is striking to consider why Lerner didn't see this coming from the outset.

It wasn't that circumstances doomed Crennel to failure, it's that he had little chance of succeeding in the first place.

There is a reason why a Ken Dorsey gets drafted in the 7th round and there is a reason a guy who's been in the league for 24 years was never hired as a head coach. Yet Lerner, Savage and former team president John Collins essentially felt they found gold where others saw pyrite when they hired Crennel.

It was the same kind of hiring the team had tried years ago when Bud Carson was named head coach.

It had even worse results.

There is little doubt that Crennel will return to the assistant coaching ranks if or when he decides to coach again. It's a far more natural fit for a man who simply was ill-equipped to do what a head coach must, keep

all of the plates spinning at the same time.

The question now on every fan's mind is whose turn is next in the barrel. In his sort of press conference Lerner said that former Pittsburgh Steelers' head coach Bill Cowher told him personally on Saturday night that he didn't anticipate coaching in 2009. Whoever else is on the list, one thing is certain Lerner won't lack for opinions from others.

What it comes down to, ultimately, is not whether the person hired has NFL head coaching experience but whether that person has NFL head coaching ability. Crennel didn't fail for lack of experience. Likewise, Tony Sparano isn't succeeding in Miami because of experience. Surprisingly, Lerner sounded at least interested in Eric Mangini, a former Browns' employee, who was fired by the New York Jets earlier today. Maybe it's that Wade Phillips isn't available.

It appears though that Lerner will first try to secure a new general manager, by whatever title, before tackling the issue of who might be the next Browns' head coach. It's the right order. In that regard Lerner did reveal that he has asked for and received permission from the Patriots to interview Scott Pioli for an as yet undefined but certainly senior front office job.

If Pioli turns him down there are others available, like Floyd Reese, Charley Casserley and Tom Donahoe. Even Bill Parcells is a remote possibility.

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But whatever direction this turns, it would be nice to think that Lerner will actually develop a credible plan before buying the furniture. History suggests otherwise.

In the meantime it's probably worth giving the Browns and Lerner credit for one thing. Whoever is running their web site is on top of it. No sooner had Crennel been fired then his name and profile were removed from the team's web site.

Thanks, Romeo, it was nice to know you.