

Broadening His Perspective

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, December 31 2008 7:00 PM -

As Cleveland Browns' owner Randy Lerner hopscotches around the eastern part of the United States in search of someone to run his beleaguered franchise, the thought occurred to Gary that somewhere a stepped was missed. Shouldn't Lerner at least ask himself the question of whether or not he's even the best person to make these decisions? History suggests he's not. In his latest Gary talks about Pioli, McKay, and the recruiting process Lerner is going through right now.



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Shouldn't Lerner at least ask himself the question of whether or not he's even the best person to make these decisions? History suggests he's not.

Lerner's last significant hires since reluctantly taking control of the franchise his father wanted were John Collins, Phil Savage and Romeo Crennel. Collins was a

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smooth, polished public relations type from the NFL's front office.

What purpose he served in the role of club president was never clearly defined by Lerner but however described he was ill-suited for it.

Lerner couldn't tell until it was too late.

Savage was a work in progress but learning from someone accomplished, former Browns' tight end Ozzie Newsome. It helped that Savage had ties with former coach Bill Belichick who, after flaming out in his first try as a head coach, has gone on to compile one of the most impressive resumes of any NFL coach ever.

Crennel was a lifelong assistant for a variety of teams, including the Browns, and had some of the same contacts with Savage and Belichick, having actually worked for the latter as defensive coordinator in New England.

As it turned out, none of those hirings worked. Collins was the first to go, which was hardly a surprise. Insecure and without a clearly defined job, a clash sooner or later was inevitable.

Crennel, frankly, should have been the next.

It's not that he wasn't a good head coach this year.

He was never a good head coach.

The problems of this season were only magnified versions of what has characterized each and every team under Crennel, magnified because of the heightened expectations that this season brought.

Savage was more of a borderline call. He has a pretty good eye for talent, certainly not as good as he thinks, but good enough to keep him employed in the NFL. But with four years of training he still never could get comfortable behind a desk.

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That's where Lerner needed him most.

Again, Lerner couldn't tell until it was too late.

Here it is, four years later and the Browns are in at least as big a mess as they were four years previously. And now we see Lerner essentially going back to the same well in hopes that different buckets of water will quench the thirst of a fan base that's been parched for the last 10 years.

Perhaps a better tact for Lerner would be to find someone else altogether to make these decisions for him. Lerner already has demonstrated that he can't put a franchise together, what makes him think he'll be better at it this time and what makes him think that he'll be better at it by turning over different rocks in the same garden?

In going about his search, Lerner seems oddly focused on finding someone with that increasingly more rare combination of Cleveland experience and success. It's a very narrow focus indeed.

That's the problem.

There's this perception Lerner is fostering that the new general manager and new head coach somehow have to "get it" when it comes to Cleveland, as if there's some deep mystery to this town. What's there to get? That the Browns have a passionate fan base?

That Browns fans are demanding?

Alert the local media, there's breaking news in the making there.

We all like to think there's something special about the Browns and their fans but that is just parochialism taken to an extreme. The passion that the fans have for

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this team and the loyalty they've shown it is only admirable because too often it's a passion and loyalty that the caretakers of the team didn't deserve.

But it's not as if Bears fans or Giants fans feel any less differently about their teams.

Still the perception exists that Cleveland requires some sort of special handling by someone well versed in the ways and means of this town. Maybe it started with Paul Brown, who stayed true to his Ohio roots and brought football fame and glory to various towns around this state.

In more recent times, the back story of Bernie Kosar, a product of Boardman, Ohio, who manipulated the supplemental draft in order to play for his favorite team, fed this beast..

But a perception that glory can only be realized here through individuals with local ties ignores the reality that the Browns' storied history was built on a far broader base.

The team's greatest player and the greatest running back in NFL history, Jim Brown, was from St. Simon's island off the coast of Georgia and went to prep school and college in western New York. Blanton Collier, one of the best and most underrated coaches ever, was from Kentucky.

Gene Hickerson was born in Tennessee and played his college ball at Ole Miss.

Leroy Kelly was born in Philadelphia and played for Morgan State in Baltimore.

The core of those glorious teams of the '80s were from elsewhere.

Brian Sipe and Clay Matthews grew up and played their college ball in Southern California.

Hanford Dixon was born in Alabama and Frank Minnifield was born in Kentucky.

I could go on but the point is made.

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Nearly every significant player or coach for this storied franchise came from somewhere else.

Yet here we find Lerner almost singularly focused on finding someone with Browns roots under the mistaken belief that that holds the key to the resurrection.

In ways that are almost too scary to contemplate, Lerner's narrow-mindedness is eerily similar to Al Davis' narrow-mindedness in Oakland.

Davis overhauls his franchise far more often than he overhauls his own wardrobe.

And at its core is a belief that only those with Raiders roots can rekindle glory lost.

But Davis' problem in Oakland is the same as Lerner's problem in Cleveland. The y've simply hired the wrong guys, repeatedly.

Davis does so because, frankly, he's nuts.

He is so antiquated in his thinking that he no longer even understands the modern game.

Lerner does so because he doesn't know better.

He sees something going right somewhere else and tries to replicate it without understanding why it's going right somewhere else in the first place.

He's drawn simple conclusions from complex situations.

The fact that Belichick and his progeny have been successful in New England has nothing to do with the fact that they cut their teeth in Cleveland first. It could have easily been Denver or Detroit.

It's just a coincidence.

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Scott Pioli and Eric Mangini or Josh McDaniels or any of the other various fruits from the Belichick tree may very well end up restoring order to this team. But it's not as if they are the only ones qualified to do so or the only ones that should be considered.

But since Lerner really has no idea how to make these underlying decisions anyway, he's doing what the unqualified usually do, head back to the familiar even if it hasn't been successful. If that works this time, it will mostly be luck. If Lerner really wants to introduce the element of skill and reason in the equation, he should step back for a moment and either take himself out of the process completely or at least listen to a few more knowledgeable people first that will convince him to broaden his perspective.