

The Ball Boy

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, January 08 2009 7:00 PM -

Feel better? Ready to re-up that season ticket package or buy some new swag? That's what Cleveland Browns owner Randy Lerner is hoping when, in his usual fashion, he formally "announced" the hiring of recently fired former New York Jets head coach Eric Mangini yesterday as the Browns' next head coach. Gary Benz has some strong thoughts on the hiring of "The Mangenius", and lays them out for our readers in his latest.



Feel better? Ready to re-up that season ticket package or buy some new swag? That's what Cleveland Browns owner Randy Lerner is hoping when, in his usual fashion, he formally "announced" the hiring of recently fired former New York Jets head coach Eric Mangini yesterday as the Browns' next head coach. Of course Lerner didn't formally announce anything. Per apparent protocol, he had someone else do it.

But before focusing on Lerner, I must confess that I wasn't even aware the Browns were in the market for new ball boys. I thought they had bigger priorities.

But the Ball Boy is what we get. Whether he ever grows into the more flattering nickname of Man-genius here is a verdict that can't be rendered for awhile. It's not that the hiring of the Ball Boy is necessarily a bad thing. It's not necessarily a good thing, either. It's just a thing. It isn't the kind of hiring that will ignite a run on

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the box office but isn't likely to cause a mass exodus from the season ticket base either. The fans are greeting the hiring with all the indifference it deserves. On a scale of Bill Cowher to Carl Pavano, the Ball Boy's hiring is far more Pavano.

Certainly hiring the Ball Boy allowed Lerner to check off a number of boxes he had on the "needs" side of whatever ledger he drew up before the "search" began. There also are a number of significant boxes that can't yet be checked off. At this point in the Ball Boy's career there just isn't enough for anyone to give his hiring an unqualified thumbs up.

That doesn't mean that hiring the Ball Boy was the wrong decision. It just wasn't particularly inspiring. The historical economic downturn is going to be a significant challenge for every team in every professional sport. Cleveland is no different. Even if the Browns had been a successful franchise, Lerner would still be facing erosion in loge sales and season tickets in 2009. He needed to hit a home run in order to give those on the tipping point a reason to tilt in the Browns' direction. Instead he hit a ball up the middle and stands on first base while the official scorer reviews whether it was a hit or an error.

That Lerner wouldn't take the dais himself, at least with cameras rolling and microphones in the on position, to introduce the Ball Boy wasn't a surprise. He sent the mostly unknown and ubiquitously titled team president Mike Kennan to make the pitch. Lerner can continue to court the "I'm not comfortable in the spotlight" image all he wants but the reality is that in doing so he underscores his own lack of leadership.

Being rich, particularly when it was more inherited than earned, doesn't make one a leader. But having decided to run the franchise, Lerner can't escape the inherent obligations, one of which is to lead this franchise. From time to time those obligations are going to make him uncomfortable. That's the essence of leadership. Yet on this most important day for his franchise, he once again abdicated his responsibilities. He hardly lives up to the image his last name conjures.

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It would be one thing if Lerner hadn't actually made the hiring decision. But from all accounts it was solely Lerner's decision. He owes it to the people he expects to fund his underlying venture to stand up in front of the camera and explain himself. It's not that much to ask and even less to do.

As to the underlying decision, it does have a bit of ass-backwardness about it. But if it's Lerner's intention to have his head coach and his general manager be functional equivalents, then there's nothing inherently wrong with it. If the Ball Boy ends up reporting to the general manager, then there's trouble ahead, if not soon then someday anyway. Again, though, it's hard to know since Lerner has never been one to explain much of anything.

The more fascinating aspect to this all is the simple fact that Lerner essentially is flying solo in this whole process without any personal record of success in that regard. Whether that makes him courageous or insane won't be known for awhile. But what is known is that Lerner won't have a John Collins or a Phil Savage to blame. This is a decision he owns alone.

For those looking to gain some insight into what may have caught Lerner's eye, the one thing the Ball Boy did say in his press conference that is bound to raise more than a few eye brows was that he too believes in the 3-4 defense. To this point, there is far more evidence that could ever be needed that it hasn't worked well here. It is personnel driven and the Browns don't currently have the players on the roster to effectively run it. The Ball Boy allowed that he won't use it if the team doesn't have the personnel, which was refreshing, so maybe this will be his first priority when it comes to rebuilding the offense this off-season. Ok, maybe second. He has to hire his boss first.

Pretty much the rest of the Ball Boy's comments were what you'd expect. Yes, he's excited. Yes, he's learned from his experiences. Yes, he believes in discipline. Yes, he understands what it means to be a Browns fan. In short, he said all the right things. The proof of course is whether he does the right things.

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While it may not be for the Ball Boy to answer, the question still remains as to why Lerner fixated on him and struck the deal in this way even with an apparent lack of competition for his services. Lerner wasn't available so there's no definitive answer. But part of it anyway seems to be that the Ball Boy has ties to the organization, even if very tenuous ones at this point.

It's apparent that Lerner believes that one of the absolute keys to the successful rebirth of this franchise is for it to be lead by someone who's been in it before. As a result his "search" was anything but comprehensive. Everyone that Lerner reportedly met with thus far has that connection, directly or indirectly, including Cowher. From there everything else seems to have flowed. The problem is it's the fans that are standing at the bottom of the hill from which all that stuff is flowing and, frankly, they are tired of getting soiled.

While the hiring of the Browns 12th full time head coach won't generate enough heat to melt the frost off a windshield that doesn't mean it won't turn out well in the long run. But for a good portion of the fans tired of patiently waiting for the next football savior, the strong suspicion is that they are asking themselves the same question as the Jets fan who runs the FireEricMangini.com website: who in their right mind would replace one ex-Patriot flop with another ex-Patriot flop? Destiny, thy name is Lerner.