

Evil Rewarded

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, January 19 2009 7:00 PM -

In Gary's latest, he says that the biggest kick in the teeth that Cleveland Browns' fans took this weekend didn't come from the Pittsburgh Steelers or even the Baltimore Ravens. It came directly from the feet of the Arizona Cardinals. Gary says that there is no franchise in any sport less deserving of success, and explains to our readers why he will shed no tears if the Cardinals are unable to pull off the upset against the hated Steelers.



The biggest kick in the teeth that Cleveland Browns' fans took this weekend didn't come from the Pittsburgh Steelers or even the Baltimore Ravens. It came directly from the feet of the Arizona Cardinals.

That the Steelers are in their 7th Super Bowl doesn't come as much of a surprise. They are a very good team. Besides, at this point, the hatred Browns' fans have for the Steelers is mostly historical. With each beating suffered at the hands of the Steelers, a once great rivalry becomes just a distant memory to Browns fans. What is a surprise is that the Cardinals, long the benchmark for woefulness in the NFL, somehow managed to turn one mildly successful season into a Super Bowl run.

If you're a glass half full kind of person, you may take some comfort in the "every dog has its day" story of the Cardinals. If you're glass half full person, which is to say a Browns fan, then you see it for what it is, confirmation that the local franchise is cursed.

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If there is any franchise in any sport less deserving of success than the Cardinals, feel free to drop me an email. Right now I can't think of one and I'm likely to disagree with any one you might come up with anyway.. And let's not misconstrue this as a knock on the Phoenix/Scottsdale area. I happen to be very fond of the place and their people. This is solely about the evil and incompetent Bidwell family which has owned the Cardinals since 1932.

As much as the local fans like to complain about the Browns and as easy as that has become in recent years, there is one thing that the Browns have never been and that's the Cardinals. In nearly 8 decades of ownership, the Bidwells have guided the franchise to exactly 21 winning season. By comparison, the Browns are relative newbies, having entered the league in 1950. But in those 54 years (excluding the 4 years when the franchise was dormant, although arguably that's been its state for the better part of 20 years, but I digress), the Browns have had 34 winning seasons.

On just that basis, it's hard to call Browns fans long-suffering when compared to the pathetic wretches that actually invest their energy in following the Cardinals. The reason Browns' fans feel so put out has something to do with the fact that 13 of those losing seasons have come just since 1990. But in roughly that same time period, the Cardinals have had 15 losing seasons. In other words, as the kids might say "get over yourselves, Browns fans."

As much as I like to complain about Randy Lerner and his erratic ownership of the Browns, he's Bill Gates when compared to the Bidwell family. For that matter, so was Ted Stepien. (Ok, maybe not Ted Stepien) In the first place, Lerner and his father never moved the

franchise, although if you're into conspiracy theories then you're still harboring closeted beliefs that Al Lerner helped orchestrate the Browns' move to Baltimore just to get ownership of the team here. The Bidwells have moved the Cardinals twice, 1959 and 1987. Even Art Modell wasn't that evil. If you're into patterns, the next scheduled move for the Cardinals should be sometime around 2024, which will be about the time that current owner, Bill, will start complaining about the creaky fixture of a facility that the University of Phoenix Stadium will eventually become.

Perhaps one might give a pass to the Bidwells for the first move out of Chicago in 1959, but I won't. At the time, Chicago had two franchises, the Bears and the Cardinals. One was a model of professionalism and success, the other was the Cardinals. In 27 seasons in Chicago under the Bidwells, the Cardinals had 21 losing seasons. They did have one highlight, 1947. That year the Cardinals actually were NFL champs with the help of running back Charley Trippi. (Interesting side note: I've met Trippi on a number of occasions. Still active and as vibrant as ever, Trippi is a class act. If you get a chance to get to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, make sure to see some of the highlights featuring Trippi. Thus, while the Cardinals are the epitome of ineptitude, mismanagement, avarice and greed, Trippi gets a pass. Fate and a then unheard of \$100,000 over 4 years is the reason he was with the Cardinals, nothing more.) It was also the year that Violet Bidwell, the wife of the William Bidwell, Sr., took over the team after her husband died.

As an owner, Violet treated the franchise like she was a Bidwell from birth. Except for 1947, the Cardinals remained generally inept and mostly broke for the remainder of their tenure in Chicago and eventually they had to move, out of fan indifference if nothing else. But being the

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NFL, where just about everything is back to the future, the city of St. Louis beckoned to bail out the Bidwells. The story is that the NFL voted to relocate the Cardinals to St. Louis to take advantage of an emerging market that was also being courted by the rival AFL. It also helped that the St. Louis community guaranteed the Bidwells a certain level of ticket revenue. See, nothing changes.

And nothing changed for the Bidwells, either. All they did for the next 28 years in St. Louis was bleed the franchise and the rest of the league dry until the city finally had had enough. It may have taken 28 years, but the city of St. Louis eventually got wise to the false promises if not outright lies of the Bidwells. While fielding a team with a losing record in 14 of their 28 seasons, and that's not counting two years in which they went .500 but giving them credit for a 5-4 record in a strike-shortened year, the Bidwells never personally suffered. A lucrative revenue sharing arrangement in a league that saw nothing but increases in revenues all but assured that would be the case. Indeed, the Bidwells became what many fans and players alike feared-owners in a sport with no incentive to win because financial rewards was no longer tied to on-the-field success.

Having then had his fill of St. Louis, Bill, Jr. followed in the footsteps of his mother and moved the franchise again, this time to Phoenix. While this may not seem like much to Cleveland fans who saw Modell uproot their team, be well assured that it was Bidwell who played a key role in the Browns' move to Baltimore.

To understand the context, you first have to remember how the Irsay family uprooted the beloved Colts from Baltimore and moved them to Indianapolis in December, 1983. Robert Irsay played the city of

Phoenix off of Indianapolis. Eventually Phoenix dropped out of the bidding leaving Indianapolis to Irsay, who snuck out of Baltimore in the middle of the night.

Where most fans saw a traitor, Bidwell saw an opportunity. Thus empowered, Bidwell started pushing around the St. Louis populace, complaining about an outdated stadium while ignoring the managerial bungling of his family. Phoenix and Jacksonville, two cities desperate for a NFL team were in the mix, but Bidwell also played on the emotions of the Baltimore fans, dangling the Cardinals as a potential prize for a city desperate for football.

Phoenix eventually won what amounted to a bidding war, under the theory, apparently, that any NFL team is better than no NFL team. But Baltimore took copious notes. Eventually that led them to basically mortgage the city's future in order to bail out another incompetent owner, Art Modell. Sure, the Browns don't move if the Irsays never move from Baltimore. But the Browns don't move without Bidwell basically schooling Baltimore in how to steal a franchise.

If you happened to watch the end of the Cardinals/Philadelphia Eagles game on Sunday, you saw the doddering old fool Bill Bidwell, son of William and Violet, shuffle on to the field to enjoy a moment some 61 years in the making. It would be easy to view Bill as the sort of endearing older gentleman finally seeing his life's work come to fruition. The truth is that Bill, more than most, got to see his life's work come to fruition years ago with each and every loss suffered by the franchise that he and his family have owned for nearly 80 years. Winning the NFC championship this season was an aberration on the level of Romeo Crennel going 10-6 with the Browns. Sooner rather than later,

the Cardinals will return to their norm.

For the cities of Phoenix and Scottsdale and all of the suburbs surrounding them, getting to the Super Bowl must feel a little like winning a raffle you forgot you entered. They have about as much emotional investment in the Cardinals and the Bidwells as Paris Hilton will have in her next boyfriend. But they'll celebrate anyway because, hey, it's a party.

The problem, though, is that for the Cardinals (and not the Phoenix area) to get what they really deserve, which is a humiliating loss on the biggest stage possible, it must come at the hands of the Steelers. It's a bit of a Hobson's choice for Cleveland fans but at least the Rooneys have never moved their franchise. Besides, they know to treat their fans.

You'll never catch me actually rooting for the Steelers under any circumstances. But if the Cardinals should end up on the wrong end of a 28-0 score in a few weeks, you won't see me shed any tears either. Besides, if there's any sight worse than seeing Hines Wards' smug grins it is that of Bill Bidwell dancing a celebratory jig.