

## Lingering Items - Super Bowl Run-Up Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, January 29 2009 7:00 PM -

---

Gary checks in with his latest edition of Lingering Items, and in this week's column, wonders aloud if a little more deliberation in the search for the team's next head coach may have paid greater dividends. In making that point, Gary cites the Steelers coaching search of a couple years ago, and the fact that Mike Tomlin emerged from nowhere late in the process. Gary also hits on the raw deal handed down to former defensive coordinator Mel Tucker, and Phil Savage's first "interview" after being given his walking papers by the Browns.



For the near term, the Cleveland Browns' next path forward is set. Arguing now about how owner Randy Lerner got there is as futile as trying to understand why Braylon Edwards is more concerned about the stadium's jumbotron graphics than his pass catching technique.

Yet, even with the path charted, it's still difficult to shake the feeling that a little more deliberation on Lerner's part may have paid greater dividends.

It did for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Mike Tomlin, the head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers, is in his second year as the head coach. He inherited a good team from former coach Bill Cowher, but if anything that was a disadvantage.

The last thing a veteran team that had just reached the pinnacle would seem to want is a wet behind the ears coach.

It just reeks of starting over.

et here the Steelers are, once again, in the Super Bowl.

Meanwhile, the Browns sit as far from the upper echelon of their league as ever. Four years burning down the road and about the only thing that's changed is the

stripe on the side of their game pants.

They have a team that isn't quite old and not quite young either.

It is an odd mix of veterans and projects with the kind of unsettled issues that are typical of a 4-12 team.

It just begs for starting over.

Instead, Lerner decided now is the time for a veteran coach.

The contrast couldn't be more striking.

Lerner was determined from the outset that his next head coach would have NFL head coach experience. When Eric Mangini suddenly became available, he shot to the top of Lerner's list. Short of throwing up on Lerner's shoes during the interview, there was little else Mangini could have done to blow the chance to become re-employed quickly even if it was by a team with desperation written all over its face.

This is where it's still worth while to step back and reconsider the what ifs. Recall that when Cowher retired, the Steelers already had two pretty good coaches-in-waiting within their ranks, Ken Whisenhut, the offensive coordinator, and Russ Grimm, the team's assistant head coach.

Either was the more logical choice. Both were already there, knew the players and had paid their dues.

It's difficult to plan that kind of continuity.

But something happened on the way to the quick coronation of one or the other-the Rooney Rule, so named for the Steelers' owner, Dan Rooney. With the essentially self-imposed requirement to interview at least one minority, Rooney was forced to be more deliberate and Steelers' history and reputation will be forever thankful for it.

## Lingering Items - Super Bowl Run-Up Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, January 29 2009 7:00 PM -

---

As even Rooney has acknowledged, Tomlin was a long shot when the hiring process started. Even though Rooney's interviewing of Ron Rivera, who was the Chicago Bears' defensive coordinator, satisfied league requirements, Tomlin probably doesn't get that interview by any team other than Pittsburgh.

Rooney wasn't just satisfying his own sense of fairness, he was doing what an owner with real vision does, measure twice and cut once.

As a result, Rooney discovered in Tomlin, a young coach with a pretty thin resume at the time, someone with that "it" factor. Given a chance to interview in a non-perfunctory setting, Tomlin took the opportunity to wow Rooney and ended up with the job he never thought possible.

In the time it's taken for the Browns to redesign their org chart again, the Steelers are back in the Super Bowl as favorites, again.

\*\*

While we're taking a measure of what ifs, let's revisit Mel Tucker, the recently deposed defensive coordinator of the Browns. Sure, Lerner interviewed Tucker for the Browns' top job, but only because he had to satisfy the Rooney Rule, but it hardly served as a speed bump to slow down the momentum Lerner had created for himself. Having already made up his mind, there was nothing Tucker could have done, , to change Lerner's mind. Small wonder that Tucker's interview lasted only about an hour, according to several reports.

Contrast that with the all-day interview Lerner supposedly had with Mangini.

This isn't to suggest that Tucker should have been hired, but rather to underscore how Browns' fans were again short-changed by a near-sighted owner while that team to the east enjoys the spoils that come from having an owner with his eyes firmly fixed on the bigger picture. Lerner talks about wanting to emulate the great

franchises of the league, like the Steelers, and then goes about doing so by violating nearly everything they are about.

Maybe Lerner figured he couldn't take a risk in really considering someone like Tucker given the state of the franchise. But some would argue, like me for instance, that this was exactly the time he needed to be bold.

By being dismissive of Tucker and perfunctory Lerner placed a much higher premium on being quick than on being right and in doing so made a mockery of the Rooney Rule for good measure.

What's even more instructive about the Tomlin story is that once hired all he did was go about ensuring some level of continuity by making sure defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau stayed put. If nothing else that was Tomlin recognizing the limits of his own experience. All Mangni has done since he's been hired is push a promising coordinator like Tucker aside and paint over the legends mural in the team's headquarters. The contrast couldn't be more striking.

Rooney certainly could have gone with a safe choice in Whisenhut, the coach his team will be facing on Sunday. By all accounts that would have worked out just fine. But what separates a franchise that's going for its 6<sup>th</sup> Super Bowl ring from one that hasn't even been to that dance is an owner that can read the room and one who can't. When safety was called for, Rooney went bold. When boldness was called for, Lerner went safe.

The popular thought is that none of this will much matter if Mangini ends up being successful. That's probably right. There isn't a Browns' fan around that isn't already sick of the plethora of false promises and false starts. There isn't a

Browns' fan around that isn't aching, just aching, to be proud once again to wear his or her brown and orange jersey in public again.

In fact, there isn't a Browns' fan around that doesn't want to see Eric Mangini transform from The Ball Boy to the Mangelius and lift a Super Bowl trophy in the middle of Public Square.

And while it's easy to be cynical about virtually everything Browns' related these days, somehow it doesn't feel cynical anymore to think that long before Mangini lifts a Super Bowl trophy to an adoring crowd in Cleveland, Tucker will be doing so on behalf of some other franchise.

\*\*

It's early but there's already a candidate for my favorite quote of the year and it comes from the imaginative lips of former general manager Phil Savage.

According to a report by Tony Grossi in Thursday's Plain Dealer, Savage was doing his usual milling about at the Super Bowl saying little and confirming nothing. But what little he did say was exquisite. Without discussing the circumstances of his firing, Savage said: "Nothing surprises anybody in this league."

I think I was more surprised that we trade for Shaun Rogers, he has the year that he had and we go 4-12.

That's more surprising to me."

Talk about Phil being Phil. In just two short sentences he pats himself on the back and again throws his handpicked former head coach under the bus. The other thing it tells me is that Savage never did understand the fan base of the team he oversaw.

I feel relatively confident in saying that the fans' reaction to the 4-12 season was well beyond mere surprise.

But then again, neither empathy nor insight were ever traits that Savage much demonstrated anyway.

For those teams out there looking to hire Savage, watch out. Under that "aw shucks" persona resides a closet narcissist with an outsized ego and a strong self-preservation instinct.

If anyone could gain perspective from sitting out a year or two, it would be Savage.

Fortunately for him he's in a position to do just that given how much of Lerner's money that now resides in his bank account.

\*\*

With Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band scheduled to appear at halftime of Sunday's Super Bowl, this week's question to ponder: "Why isn't a Cleveland date on Springsteen's newly announced tour?"