

With the date that roster bonuses are due to be paid quickly approaching, we've seen even more turnover with the Browns under the new leadership of general manager Eric Mang errr George Kokinis. Sent packing were Joe Jurevicius and Kevin Shaffer. Could Jamal Lewis and Donte Stallworth-less be next? In Gary's latest, he talks about the perception that Phil Savage left the new regime behind the eight ball, and also the next set of decisions coming for the Browns current leadership.



If one's job performance is evaluated as a series of debits and credits, then the Browns' former general manager Phil Savage will almost always come up short in the final accounting. While he did some good for the team, just ask him, there were far more missteps. Put it this way, Savage did enough bad that owner Randy Lerner was forced to pay attention long enough to write a discharge letter. Getting Lerner fired up about anything other than his Ashton Villa soccer team speaks volumes about how Savage's ledger looked by the time last season mercifully closed.

That all being said, the placement of [the story in Friday's print edition of the Plain Dealer](#) on Friday about how some of the player contracts that Savage and former cap specialist Trip MacCraken negotiated are supposedly handcuffing the new organization was a little suspect. The issue is roster bonuses now due to players like Joe Jurevicius, Kevin Shaffer, Derek Anderson, Donte Stallworth, Joe Thomas, Corey Williams, Shaun Rogers and Jamal Lewis.

The obvious implication was that these contracts were essentially hidden land mines planted in Berea by the evil and incompetent Savage. It's a stretch. In every case except that of Thomas, these were contracts given to free agents at the time and structured in a way to minimize and smooth out the salary cap hit to the team. Every team in the NFL has these kinds of contracts, including those of general manager George Kokinis' former team, the Baltimore Ravens, and head coach Eric Mangini's former team, the New York Jets. It's standard operating procedure. Indeed, it's why there are so many free agents in the first place.

In that context, it's actually easy to make the case that the work of Savage and MacCracken actually benefited the Browns. Under the NFL's somewhat byzantine-like salary cap rules, bonuses paid are pro-rated over the stated length of the contract. If a contract is terminated sooner than its stated length, bonuses paid are accelerated in the year the player is let go and a salary cap hit is taken in that year. For example, if a player is given a 5-year contract for \$1 million in salary a year plus a \$10 million signing bonus, the team has to count \$3 million each year against its salary cap (\$1 million in salary, \$2 million of the signing bonus). If that player gets cut after his third year, then for that next year, the team must accelerate the \$4 million of the salary bonus that was supposed to go against the team's salary cap in years 4 and 5 of the contract. It's what is commonly referred to as dead money because the team loses flexibility under its salary cap but doesn't have the services of the player in return.

When Savage and MacCracken negotiated the contracts in question, some of the guaranteed bonus money was deferred as roster bonuses in subsequent years rather than paid upfront as signing bonuses. By doing that, it gave the Browns flexibility in two key ways. First, if the player got cut before the bonus was due, it would never count against the salary cap because it was never paid in the first place. Second, it gave the Browns the chance to determine in subsequent years whether the player was living up to the value of the contract. In other words, these later bonuses serve as an off-ramp of sorts for the Browns so that they aren't forced to keep a marginally productive player simply because cutting him would cause too large of a salary cap hit.

Rather than argue about whether these contracts really are hamstringing Kokinis

and Mangini, the better question is whether or not those two are making the right calls in who to cut and who to keep.

In the case of Jurevicius, the Browns almost seem petty. While he missed all of last season and his expected contributions this season might be minimal, surely the intangible quality of keeping a locally-connected player who actually bleeds brown and orange is worth the relatively minimal \$250,000 roster bonus he was due. The guess is that the Kokinis didn't so much choke on the bonus amount but on the \$2.4 million base salary. Still, given the Browns' cap room, which is ample, cutting Jurevicius likely will turn out to be a case of stepping over dollars to pick up dimes.

Cutting Shaffer is far more ho-hum. There are two truths here to remember. First, the Browns line, with Shaffer, wasn't all that impressive last season anyway. Second, Shaffer's only real calling card is versatility, meaning he can play either tackle position. Unfortunately, he's just mediocre at it and there are plenty of similar bodies floating about the NFL that Kokinis and Mangini can find at a lesser price. One of those might actually be Shaffer himself, who still hasn't ruled out returning albeit at a reduced price.

The issue on Lewis is simply whether there is anything left in his tank and whether the Browns have any other viable options. In the short run, the answer to those issues are "doubtful" and "only if they draft Beanie Wells." Rogers, despite his on-going cold war with Mangini, isn't going anywhere anytime soon, absent a trade. Williams isn't going anywhere, either. The Browns need bodies on defense. These two more than qualify. As for Thomas, he's a Pro Bowl left tackle. He'll be in Cleveland for most of his career.

The two far trickier issues involve Anderson and Stallworth. Anderson is due a \$5 million bonus, which is pretty substantial, or else he'll be a free agent. It's hard to know at this point what Mangini really thinks of Anderson or Brady Quinn, for that matter, but we at least know that he thinks enough of Anderson to simply not let him get away for free. Paying Anderson the roster bonus helps keep a potential

draft-day trade alive.

As for Stallworth, the situation is more practical if not more convoluted. To understand his situation, you first have to recognize that unless a new collective bargaining agreement is in place before next season, 2010 will be an uncapped year. That's the result of the owners giving notice to the union before last season that they were opting out of the collective bargaining agreement early. By giving that notice, it automatically made 2010 an uncapped season. Further, since the union is still trying to elect a new president, the chances that there will be a new contract in place before next season grow less with each passing day. The union has plenty of work getting its house in order before its ready to sit down with the owners.

This explains nicely the situation with Stallworth. If he's cut now, then most of the more than \$5 million signing bonus he was given last season will hit the Browns' cap this season. If they instead pay him the \$4.75 million roster bonus he's now due and then cut him after this season, then they are only fractionally adding to this year's cap (with six years remaining on his ridiculous contract, they are only adding 1/6th of that \$4.75 million roster bonus to this year's cap) and banking on taking no cap hit in 2010 when he's inevitably cut after another injury-riddled and unproductive season. All this play costs them is another \$4.75 million which Stallworth doesn't deserve. Now it's becoming clear why the Browns laid off so many front office types.

But as with everything else related to Stallworth, you can pretty much bank on the notion that this situation will resolve itself in the worst way imaginable, meaning that he plays little, the collective bargaining agreement gets signed, 2010 becomes a capped season, and the Browns are forced to keep him for still another miserable year because the cap hit would otherwise be huge. When that happens, it won't have been Savage and MacCraken who handcuffed Kokinis and Mangini. They will have done it to themselves.

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It may not be a straight line that got me there, but just thinking about Stallworth makes me feel sorry for Trent Edwards. The second-year quarterback of the Buffalo Bills will never see it coming. But when he gets run over by a bus sometime next season, you can be sure it will be driven by newly-acquired receiver Terrell Owens.

Publicly, the Bills are saying all the things a team is supposed to say when they take a flyer on a player with a past. It's what we like to call "spin." And while, Owens, too, is saying the right things now you can just bet that had Owens had the kind of contract that had forbidden trades to certain teams, the Bills would have been on that list.

It's not that there's anything inherently wrong with the Bills. It's just that they are the NFL equivalent to dinner theater and Owens still believes he should be playing Broadway. It promises to be a volatile mix. The aging superstar relegated to the league's back pages will inevitably become the difficult-to-manage diva demanding star treatment. And while there's a certain amount of crap nearly every player will learn to live with in the quest for success, that line will get drawn once they've been sold out by a teammate like Owens. The over and under is three regular season games. The smart money is on the under.

Indeed, Bills players calling Owens a teammate will be like Indians players calling Keith Hernandez a teammate. It's a technical label only. Owens is to Buffalo what ketchup is to pancakes.

That being said and other than the risk to team harmony and the psyche of a young, developing quarterback, the Bills' one-year deal with Owens wasn't the worst signing in NFL free agency. The distinction goes to Savage and his signing of Stallworth.

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There has been a lot of talk about all of the former Jets who are or are soon to be members of the Browns. This is the football equivalent to the new boss bringing over a few of his old cronies from his former employer.

Frankly, there's nothing wrong with Mangini seeding his team with allies. He already faces an uphill battle with many of the players who not only liked former head coach Romeo Crennel personally, but also enjoyed the rather country club-like culture he cultivated.

Mangini is nothing if not a hard worker himself. He'll expect nothing less, and probably even more, from his players. The fact that he is dismantling the players' lounge in favor of expanding the locker room is a marker for where he places his priorities when it comes to the touchy-feely aspects of the job. In other words, if anything he'll be to the right of Bill Belichick when it comes to cultivating and maintaining personal relationships.

That isn't always a bad thing as long as Mangini doesn't confuse fear with respect. There's nothing wrong with the charges having a little fear

of the leader as long as it's built on a foundation of respect. And since respect is earned not assumed, there's some method here to Mangini's reliance on former players. Presumably they already have respect for him. If other players can see that, then perhaps he'll be on his way toward earning that respect from the rest of the team he still doesn't know. On the other hand, if they feel these former Jets players are just plants, these signings will blow up in his face. Stay tuned because as with everything else related to Mangini it may not be fun but it will be interesting.

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Given the intersection of the old and the new regimes, this week's question to ponder: What's likely to happen first, fans embrace Mangini and Kokinis or fans long for the bygone days of Savage and Crennel?