

Lingering Items - Madness Edition

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If published reports are true, and they appear to be, then Cleveland Browns wide receiver Donte Stallworth can forget about his quadriceps for awhile. He's got much bigger problems to deal with and they have nothing to do with football. In Gary's latest edition of Lingering Items, he hits on Stallworth's impending legal issues, Shaun Rogers' absence from mini-camp, and Mangini stockpiling no name free agents that used to play for him.



If published reports are true, and they appear to be, then Cleveland Browns wide receiver Donte Stallworth can forget about his quadriceps for awhile. He's got much bigger problems to deal with and they have nothing to do with football.

Stallworth, the enigmatic receiver signed by former general manager Phil Savage before last season, is soon to be in a fight for his freedom, let alone a spot on the Browns' 2009 roster, as he gets ready to face vehicular manslaughter charges stemming from his striking and killing a pedestrian with his Bentley on a causeway in Miami Beach last week.

Various reports say Stallworth was well over the legal limit for blood alcohol at the time of the accident. If true, Stallworth's incredibly bad judgment will serve as the marker for the dramatic and tragic turnaround of several lives.

Of immediate concern is the family of Mario Reyes, the person who was killed by an inattentive Stallworth. Reyes had just left work minutes before the accident. How anyone copes with a tragedy so random is hard to know. And while the Reyes family will undoubtedly be compensated for their loss, really is there any amount that will ease the pain of a wife who lost her husband or a child who lost his father?

The next victims are Stallworth's family. As innocent bystanders, they are forced, too, to endure the loss of a loved one who may very well end up in prison for a very long time. Even if Stallworth somehow avoids prison that can never change the permanent impact that the events of last Saturday morning will have on them. They will forever be branded by a punishing public eye.

As for Stallworth, one never knows what to make of a person caught in such circumstances. Certainly, there are those who will feel that he gets what he deserves. It's hard to argue against it. Stallworth was an obscenely overpaid football player living the life of privilege. The day of the accident he had just been paid nearly \$5 million from the Browns as the second installment on an equally obscene contract. We don't know all the facts, but it's not hard to conclude that at roughly 7 a.m. and with a blood alcohol well over the legal limit, Stallworth wasn't starting a new day but finishing an old one. Paid his money, he took his chances.

But there's also a certain amount of "there but for the grace of God go I" feeling about the whole thing. The truth is most of those who will have no trouble feeling indignant about Stallworth have themselves probably driven more than a few times with a little too much alcohol in their system. On any of those occasions, a child could have darted out from between parked cars or tried to beat the traffic as he crossed a busy street. Even under the best of circumstances, let alone impaired circumstances, tragedy could result and lives forever changed.

There's no excuse for what Stallworth did. There never is. It's just an acknowledgement that it is hardly ever a simple case of evil is as evil does. I'm certain Stallworth's grief is real but it will hardly suffice. It won't bring back Mario

Reyes and it isn't likely to save his career.

At this point, no one associated with the Browns has said much. But really, what could they say anyway? It's too soon to deal with football issues. Undoubtedly, though, the chances of Stallworth ever suiting up again for the Browns, or anyone else in the NFL, are unlikely at this point.

At the very least, Stallworth will be suspended by the league. It's just a question for how long. Then it will be up to the Browns whether or not to sever its ties with Stallworth. He may be working out right now with the team, but that doesn't mean much. Had it not been for the salary cap impact cutting him would have had, Stallworth probably would have been released instead of being paid the bonus last week. If the Browns release him now, the cap hit will be even worse unless they can find a way to void that bonus payment. That will be difficult, but not impossible.

Should the Browns keep Stallworth around, he'll be nothing but a distraction. As difficult as the media scrutiny will be, the fan scrutiny will be far more unrelenting, especially on the road. This tragedy will forever define Stallworth, both on and away from the playing field. Besides, Stallworth isn't a fan favorite in the first place and now he's given a reason for fans to like him even less, if that's even possible.

This saga will play out over the next several weeks and months. But as an interim matter, and not to make light of the real life implications of this tragedy, the Browns now officially have a major problem at wide receiver. Assuming Stallworth is gone, that leaves the Browns with exactly five wide receivers on the roster: Braylon Edwards, Syndric Steptoe, Paul Hubbard, Lance Leggett, and Josh Cribbs. That outlook makes it officially irrelevant who quarterbacks this team next year. With no one to throw to anyone, including Ken Dorsey, is perfectly capable of handing off the ball.

That roster bonus and 2009 salary to Joe Jurevicius suddenly isn't looking all that

expensive, is it?

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The Browns' first "voluntary" workouts under new head coach Eric Mangini began this past week and, per the Belichick manual, they are off limits to the media. In fact, they are so off limits that the entire Browns' organization is officially forbidden from commenting on who exactly is and is not at these workouts. We do know Stallworth is there, according to his attorney. Perhaps his attorney didn't get the two word memo from Mangini that says "acknowledge nothing."

Mangini tends to approach these kinds of activities like the CIA approaches covert operations. If they are never acknowledged, then whatever actually takes place can be easily denied. And let's dispense right now with the notion that these workouts are voluntary. That's just a legal word to get the team in compliance with the collective bargaining agreement. In actuality, the workouts are about as voluntary as attendance at the boss's Christmas party.

That's why it's fascinating that defensive tackle Shaun Rogers is not attending. This was as predictable as a Mangini press conference. Rogers is walking around with a giant chip on his shoulder over perceived slights at the hands of Mangini. It's his alpha way of saying "you may be the coach, but you aren't the boss of me." It's also his business way of saying "do you know how much money I *could* make if they cut me?"

The fact that Rogers is tweaking Mangini in this manner has to be gnawing at him like a flesh-eating virus. It's as if you can hear the pinwheels turning in Mangini's head even as he downplays the whole matter.

But if Rogers thinks this little test of manhood is over, he should think twice.

Mangini isn't the kind of guy to forgive such transgressions, even if his ego figures prominently into the reason this little stare down started in the first place. That doesn't mean that Rogers will be sent packing anytime soon. That would be giving Rogers what he apparently wants, which means that Mangini will do the opposite. Besides, Mangini has a roster full of more holes than the economy and isn't about to open another one just to placate a player with a grudge who also now thinks he may be a tad underpaid.

Instead, Mangini will find other ways to extract his revenge. Maybe it will be an extra set of gassers or two for the entire defensive line, particularly when he sees Rogers bent over trying to catch his breath from the last set. Maybe he'll figure out what Rogers' favorite meal is in the Browns' cafeteria and eliminate from the menu. Maybe he'll just keep calling Rogers' cell phone and then hang up. Who knows since this whole thing is so childish in the first place.

One thing, though, is certain. When it comes time for Rogers to make his next move, you can already pretty much count on what it will be. Once the draft is over, the Browns will have their first mandatory off season workouts. Rogers will be there. And when the weigh-in comes, you just know that he'll be overweight. Not grossly overweight, mind you, but just enough to send Mangini back into his office to crawl into a fetal position for a few hours.

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Corey Ivy? Really?

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Noah Herron? Really?

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As I told you previously, don't expect the Browns to be anything but fringe players in free agency this off season. That's certainly been true. Thus far, the Browns have signed a bunch of no-name former Jets and a few no-name others. To say that as a result the roster has been improved would be only slightly less outrageous than reporting that AIG just paid another round of employee bonuses.

The Browns need depth, certainly, but if the likes of Ivy, Herron, John St. Clair, David Bowens, C.J. Mosely and Robert Royal are what passes for depth, then all Mangini's done is replace one set of rickety deck chairs on this Titanic with another. It's hard to see exactly how any of these signings really advance the team's overall interests and, not surprisingly, Mangini isn't commenting.

With an offseason that is going about as well at this point as last season, Mangini and Kokinis better have something dramatic planned for the draft. Otherwise, with an economy that's hitting this area as hard as any, owner Randy Lerner is going to find a lot of season ticket holders dressed up as empty seats come September.

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Apropos to nothing, this week's question to ponder is specifically directed at fans of Fox's *24*: Knowing that few teams in the NFL employ Level 6 analysts, will Mangini start encrypting his weekly game plans with Blowfish 148? On second thought, maybe he already does.