

The Value Of Josh Cribbs

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Monday, May 18 2009 7:00 PM -

According to various media outlets, it appears Browns' special teams extraordinaire Josh Cribbs will likely skip mini-camp due to contract issues. Considering the toughness, excitement and leadership Cribbs brings to the special teams units, this is not a good situation for the Browns heading into 2009. In Dave Kolonoch's latest, he asks the question: is Josh Cribbs worth a big new contract? And how should the Browns new brass handle this dilemma?



[Cribbs Expected to Skip Mini-Camp](#)

According to Pro Football Talk.com and TheOBR.com, it appears Browns' special teams extraordinaire Josh Cribbs will likely skip mini-camp due to contract issues. Considering the toughness, excitement and leadership Cribbs brings to the

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special teams units, this is not a good situation for the Browns heading into 2009.

The problem is that Cribbs inked a long-term deal before he became a high-end return specialist. And so he's under contract for four more seasons, with base salaries of \$620,000 in 2009, \$635,000 in 2010, \$650,000 in 2011, and \$790,000 in 2012. He also can earn up to \$400,000 in incentives each year, and he's eligible for \$25,000 in annual workout bonuses.

There is no question that Cribbs is underpaid. However, there is also no question that Cribbs signed his last contract, which was generously structured to accomodate the potential the Browns saw in an undrafted free agent. However, the tenuous nature of an NFL player demands that money be made now. In this sense, Cribbs wants to get paid. For a special teams star with no other defined football role, the time to ask for a raise is now.

Of course, there is one small problem. Literally.

During Mangini's three years with the Jets, three different players made similar claims: guard Pete Kendall, receiver Laveranues Coles, and tight end Chris Baker.

Taylor reports that, after the arrival of the Mangini-Kokinis regime, Cribbs was told that the team would focus on fixing his contract after the 2009 draft. Three weeks later, no progress has been made.

Besides being the Czar of Berea, Eric Mangini is as much a disciple of Bill Belichick as any coach/head of player personnel in the league. Knowing this, it is not a stretch to suggest that Mangini will not cave into Cribbs' demands for a new deal, regardless of what was promised to him last year, or even a few months ago. Add to this the vague nature of Cribbs' role on either offense or defense and it is likely that Mangini will not make satisfying Cribbs a top priority. On paper, the Browns front office has to consider a new contract for Cribbs as essentially a new contract for a special teams player.

As for Mangini's history of refusing to cave into veteran players' contract demands, Cribbs' situation may be a little different. Trying to figure out Cribbs' worth is difficult, if not completely vague. Paying him what he's worth may prove to be more challenging. Does Cribbs deserve Devin Hester money?

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So the question in Berea is this: Is Cribbs worth a new deal? Let's try to figure this out.



What Cribbs Brings:

Obviously, the biggest intangible Cribbs brings to the Browns is his unique and highly effective role as a kick returner. Cribbs is a rare talent here, as he blends good straight-line speed and shifty moves with an awe-inspiring ability and passion for simply running over defenders. Without reaching to hyperbolic heights, Cribbs is certainly the best power-running kick returner in the league, and is possibly one of the best ever, in terms of physicality.

The often unnoticed skill that Cribbs brings to the team is his excellent kick coverage skills. For a former college quarterback, Cribbs is a very sound tackler, among the best on the team. The physical nature of his runbacks can also be found in his kick coverage, as Cribbs is an ideal gunner who consistently forces containment or makes tackles. This blend of size and speed again makes him very unique as a special teams defender. Cribbs' absence would be hard to replace, even on a unit that often features incredibly replaceable parts.

Everything else in Cribbs' game consists of the great unknown. Cribbs is not a great punt returner, as he doesn't seem to excel when given a smaller space to work with. Punt returning demands an almost slippery type of skill set, which Cribbs does not possess. Cribbs' best return asset is essentially his ability to get a head of steam going on a runback and then blast into his blocking wedge. On most punts, Cribbs is unable to do this, based on the nature of the play.

As for an offensive role, it remains to be seen what Cribbs can really do. Part of this can be blamed on the often scattered Romeo Crennel/Rob Chudzinski based offenses, which stressed more downfield routes. For Cribbs, running routes from a receiver position proved to be a problem. Basically, it appears that Cribbs does not read coverages well and is not built physically or mentally to run smooth pass routes. Cribbs' body is pretty much undefined based on a particular position. His build slightly resembles a tall corner, yet he runs like a power back.

Defensively, it is possible that Cribbs could assume a safety role, but his inability to learn offense could also prove problematic on the other side of the ball. Again, Cribbs' instincts are best, and possibly only served running straight distances, and through defenders. There's no question that Cribbs would be able to handle the physical nature of defense, but considering the high intellectual demands of an Eric Mangini defense, it is probably more idealistic to think that Cribbs could contribute on defense.

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Why the Browns Should Pay Cribbs:

Simply for the game-changing nature of his special teams play, the Browns should lock up Cribbs with a new deal. During the 2007 season, Cribbs' play almost single-handedly won the Browns 2-3 games. Consider the Browns' win over Baltimore, when Phil Dawson tied the game with his pinball field goal. If it wasn't for Cribbs' excellent return to set the Browns up with great field position, none of the resulting controversy and dramatics would have occurred.

Another key reason Eric Mangini should advocate a new deal for Cribbs is the immense popularity he commands in Cleveland. Not only is Cribbs a local boy, coming from Kent State, but he is the kind of self-made, selfless player that only arrives so often. Cribbs' physical play, combined with his electrifying abilities makes him vital to the team moving forward. Despite the team's brutal finish to the 2008 season, the value of Cribbs could be found in his hustling, spirited play during the hopeless month of December.

And did I mention Josh's Cribbs? The hilarity Cribbs brought us when Darnell Dinkins was locked in the walk-in freezer warrants a new contract in itself. I wonder if Mangini saw that episode?

For a team desperately searching for an identity, Josh Cribbs is someone you want on your roster.

So, the case is closed. Right?

Why They Shouldn't:

Because of all the attributes that makes Cribbs such a dynamic player, the Browns should think long and hard before extending or signing Cribbs to a long-term deal. Even though Cribbs is relatively young, he has been playing at a high level since 2005, which is like 30 years in real time. Cribbs has been dealing punishing blows on kick coverage, but he has also received his share on returns. The question is simple: how much longer will Cribbs consistently perform?

Looking at the recent history of the league's top returners, any observant fan has to notice that special teamers have a short shelf life. Considering the physical pounding they take combined with the deterioration of speed due to age, top returners are fortunate to get away with 4-5 productive years. I'm feeling incredible

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sadness in saying this, but Cribbs has probably peaked and can only go down from here.

As for Cribbs' kick coverage skills, the same can be said. His body will probably not outlive the terms of a new contract. Also, the NFL experiences constant personnel turnover on special teams units. It is rare for an athletic talent to last several years as a top special teams defender. It is also worth noting that the infusion of new talent that will likely occur during Mangini's Cleveland nature could reduce Cribbs' importance. 2009 will signal the start of this transformation, as both David Veikune, Kaluka Maivia, and the rookie corners will probably fill key special teams roles.

What They Should Do:

Cribbs is certainly a key part of the Browns and deserves a pay raise. What he brings to the team is toughness, leadership and a rare game-changing ability. It is worth it to keep happy any player who can affect the outcome of a game. However, in terms of the future, it is also smart to avoid a Devin Hester-type deal, considering that Cribbs is not a contributor in any other aspects of the game, and is likely to begin breaking down in the coming seasons.

So, what is the solution?

How about this? The Browns should sign Cribbs to a modest four-year contract that ranges in salary from \$600,000 to \$800,000. This way, the Browns don't overextend themselves by committing a huge sum of money to a player that only affects one area of the game. Oh, wait...nevermind...

What the Browns do with Josh Cribbs will be the first real test of the Eric Mangini regime. Are the Browns truly rebuilding, or just revamping the roster for a 2009 run? Cribbs brings great value and explosiveness to a team whose current direction is pretty much undefined. The prolonging or resolving of his contract situation could send a clear signal to Browns fans regarding the team's future.

I guess this is why people who are smarter than me actually make these decisions.