

## The Dance Begins

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, May 18 2009 7:00 PM -

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Contract disputes in professional sports are like the buzzards returning to Hinckley. They happen every year. This year the dispute season gets off to a bit of a rousing start as Cleveland Browns' receiver/kick returner/special teams player extraordinaire Josh Cribbs fired a shot across the bow of the good ship Browns just as a new captain begins to settle into his quarters. In his latest column, Gary Benz takes a look at the looming contract battle between Cribbs and the new brass.



Contract disputes in professional sports are like the buzzards returning to Hinckley. They happen every year. This year the dispute season gets off to a bit of a rousing start as Cleveland Browns' receiver/kick returner/special teams player extraordinaire Josh Cribbs fired a shot across the bow of the good ship Browns just as a new captain begins to settle into his quarters.

It's easy to get caught up in the emotion of a contract dispute. Fan reaction tends to ebb and flow depending on the team and the player but generally speaking fans tend to take the side of management, believing in the sanctity of the contract, seeing the player as greedy.

Every once in awhile though the plight of a player strikes a chord with the fans. Kellen Winslow? Most fans felt like he got what he deserved when his contract was re-worked downward after his motorcycle accident. They were glad he was traded because he was a contract dispute in the making that no one had the stomach to endure.

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With Cribbs, the reaction is and will be far more mixed. Sure, he signed a multi-million dollar contract just two seasons ago and it has for more years to run.

But on the other hand he is about the only player on the Browns' roster who seems to approach each play as if it's his last.

Give him what he deserves.

The more pragmatic way to look at all of these disputes is to treat it like those buzzards in Hinckley; observe from a distance.

Frankly, it's hard to get too excited one way or the other about a player and his contract. The notion that they are somehow sacrosanct is as quaint as it is unrealistic. Most players, and certainly every agent, treat contracts as mere guidelines. Every good season deserves even more money. Team management tends to do the same thing. When it suits their interests they have no qualms asking a player to "restructure" and implicitly brand that player in the media as disloyal when he doesn't.

While the dispute between Cribbs and the Browns has all the typical elements, there are some interesting twists that promise to make this an interesting spring and early summer for head coach Eric Mangini and general manager George Kokinis.

Cribbs is a true Horatio Alger character. Plucked from the obscurity of one of the Mid American Conference's perennially worst teams, Cribbs has risen from an undrafted, un-thought of free agent to a valuable NFL player.

He's gone from earning the league minimum to earning a long-term contract with \$2 million guaranteed.

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The problem for Cribbs, though, is that his contract, which he just signed two years ago and which runs for four more seasons, is undervalued when compared to similar players in the league. By implication Cribbs blames his former agent, which is why he's the former agent. But that's just part of the story.

Cribbs signed a club-friendly contract with the Browns because, frankly, he couldn't believe his good fortune.

Most assuredly his former agent told him the pros and cons of signing such a long term deal, not the least of which is that if kept performing at his current level, he'd quickly become underpaid on a relative basis. Still Cribbs signed it anyway. Life is about choices.

It was undoubtedly more money than he had ever seen in his life.

Now Cribbs wants even more. That's not a criticism, just a statement of fact. His new agent, J.R. Rickert, is presenting the usual argument, that Cribbs has outperformed his contract. It's the worst argument of all to make. Cribbs didn't so much outperform his contract as his contract underperformed relative to others in the league.

There is a difference.

Again, though, the problem is that this was entirely foreseeable and if you're weighing just the simple equities of the matter based on the arguments presented, Cribbs loses, in a walk.

But the twist here is that Cribbs supposedly was promised a renegotiation of his contract by former general manager Phil Savage. It's a promise the Browns' new regime implicitly acknowledges through its carefully worded public statement on Monday that no one in the "current" administration made that promise.

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Here's where the equities start tipping in Cribbs' favor.

The Cleveland Browns are an entity guided on a daily basis by whomever the owner shoves into the various roles. If Savage made that promise, it was on behalf of the Browns and not on behalf of Savage personally.

Disclaiming that promise as being made by the previous regime in this context is disingenuous.

In another context, it would be unlawful.

Look at it this way. If Savage had announced publicly during the middle of last year's most miserable of seasons that the team would hold the line on season ticket prices in 2009, you'd expect the Browns to honor that commitment even if it was made by the prior regime. If Kokinis then announced a ticket price increase for 2010 and the public relations department issued a statement saying that no one in the current administration made the previous commitment, as a season ticket holder you'd be pretty upset.

Even if the initial commitment didn't amount to a legally binding contract you'd still feel like you were cheated and rightfully so.

That's a little of what's taking place here. Assuming that Cribbs and his agent are telling the truth on this issue, an assumption that seems reasonable given the Browns' statement, Cribbs has a right to be perturbed.

His only recourse is to withhold his services, despite an otherwise binding contract hanging over his head.

In Cribbs' view, he'd only be reacting to an injustice served upon him first.

It's a powerful view.

But making this even more interesting is the final allegation leveled by Rickert and

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Cribbs. They claim that after Savage left, owner Randy Lerner reiterated the commitment in a phone call to Cribbs. That's where the announcement by the Browns on Monday really fits in.

Lerner essentially denies that it ever took place.

On the surface, it seems like something that is black or white. Either Lerner made the commitment or not and therefore either Lerner or Cribbs is lying.

More likely, it's not black or white.

Lerner and Cribbs probably did speak after Savage left.

Lerner may have heaped on Cribbs a mountain of platitudes.

Cribbs may have brought up his contract, but in general terms.

Lerner may have said, in general terms, that the team wants to take care of players like Cribbs.

In other words, it probably was one of those conversations where each took from it what they wanted to hear, kind of like that conversation you had about golfing next weekend instead of visiting her mother.

The more pressing issue for the Browns is one of perception, and not by the fans.

Mangini and, to a lesser extent Lerner, need to decide how they want to be viewed by the players.

It's trickier than it seems.

You can argue for "doing the right thing"; but sometimes the "right thing"; for a player and the "right thing"; for the team conflict.

This could be one of those situations.

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Renegotiate Cribbs' contract and the line will form outside of Kokinis' office an hour later. Try drawing that line. Stand firm on the Cribbs' contract and good luck trying to convince other players to sign long-term deals.

One thing seems certain, though. If the Cribbs situation spirals out of control, Mangini and Lerner may win the battle but will lose the war.

They will become paycheck administrators that will breed a workforce of paycheck players.

The problem with this team since its return is that it has been filled with far too many paycheck players.

Cribbs and his fellow receiver Braylon Edwards provide the perfect point/counterpoint of the debate. Could there be a player with less passion than Edwards or more passion than Cribbs? If the season were on the line, in whose hands would you rather see the ball?

For too long the Browns have been assembled as if it was a game of Fantasy Football. Individuals have been signed or discarded based solely on statistics with little concern for actual performance. It's fine to have a running back averaging nearly 4 yards a carry, but does he have the desire to score from the one-yard line on third down in a tight game?

Mangini claims that he wants to build a team with players, which is coachspeak for having athletes whose will to win and desire for the game are their most prominent features. Dealing with Cribbs in a way that fairly resolves the issue will go a long way toward determining whether Mangini is serious or just another empty whistle.