

Where Have You Gone, Chuck Fusina?

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Thursday, May 21 2009 7:00 PM -

It has become obvious over the past few years that our Cleveland Browns have lacked the talent necessary to consistently compete in the league. In Dave Kolonich's latest piece, he harkens back to the mid eighties, when the Browns also desperately needed an infusion of talent. And they got it, from the United States Football League (USFL) ... adding guys like Frank Minnifield, Mike Johnson, and Kevin Mack.



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It has become obvious over the past few years that our Cleveland Browns have lacked the talent necessary to consistently compete in the league. Due to a constant flux of top executives that have stormed through Berea in the past decades, the team has failed to realize a true identity, except in terms of futility. Blame this on poor drafting, weak coaching, inept ownership or the element of the unknown that exists every year in the form of devastating injuries and the even more crippling effects of staph infection, but whatever the case, the Browns are consistently a step below the rest of the league.

If the old adage is true that coaches are only as good as their players, then the Browns can never successfully sustain a long-term leader. The revolving door that sets in motion every 3-4 years will continue for the foreseeable future until something is done to first acquire quality talent, and then to maintain the services of these players. The current Josh Cribbs situation speaks volumes about the team's lingering difficulties in maintaining positive and effective relationships with key players.

So almost in spite of the Browns' horrid leadership at the top of the organization, what can be done to improve the talent level of team....and conversely preserve the stability that is acquired through keeping one head coach in place for several seasons? Talent. The Browns need talent and a lot of it. Unfortunately, the draft only occurs once a year.

Watching the riveting drama of the NBA Draft Lottery Monday night, I enviously began to imagine scenarios where NFL teams could recruit players from overseas, in seemingly obscure areas where only the sagest of scouts could sniff out potential. But why stop here? Surely, some remote tribal areas have to feature a raw, freak of nature that with a steady diet and training could evolve into a superstar.

But sadly, in the most American of all games, the NFL, these places don't exist. All of the London expansion and World Bowl preseason games cannot change things. Football is quintessentially an American sport featuring the kind of bodies that only a high-fructose corn syrup saturated society like ours can produce. So for a team as chronically inept at drafting as the Browns are, the question has to be asked...is there any hope?

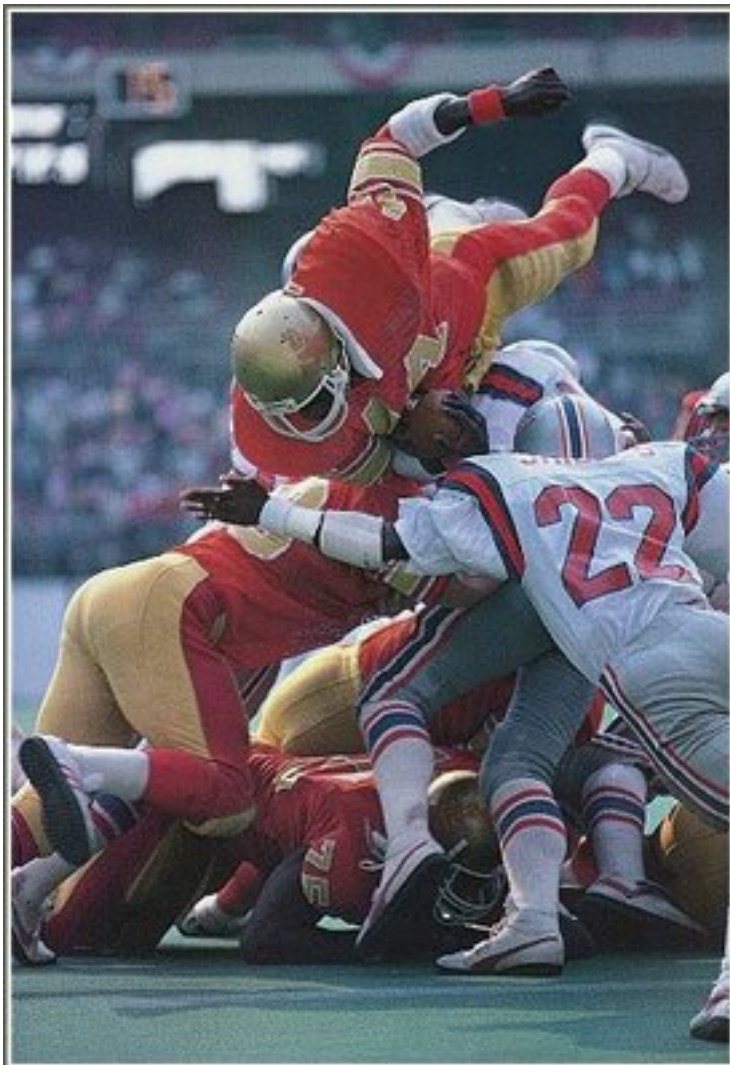
Where Have You Gone, Kelvin Bryant?

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As a forlorn Browns fan who grew up in the 80's, my Holy Grail of Triumph sadly remains the Browns run and eventual stumble through the AFC Championship games of 1986 and 1987. (1989 doesn't count.) The Browns of the mid-80's were a young, defensive-minded team who suffered through the mediocrity of the post Sam and Co. era. Helmed by Marty Schottenheimer, a former defensive coordinator who endorsed toughness and intelligence in his players, the Browns quickly rose to the top of the conference and had a four-year run, where they annually challenged for the Super Bowl.

The Browns drafted well during this era, beginning with some solid defensive picks in the 1984 draft, as well as finding the hidden gem, Earnest Byner, in the 10th round. The drafts that followed produced more contributors, including Bernie Kosar, Webster Slaughter, Reggie Langhorne and some more solid defenders.



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However, the extra little bump that sent the Browns over the top can easily be attributed to the USFL. Consider that the Browns added the following players to their roster during and after the USFL's brief history.

CB - Frank Minnifield

LB - Mike Johnson

RB - Kevin Mack

OL - Dan Fike

DL - Sam Clancy

DB - Mark Harper

P - Jeff Gossett

DB - D.D. Hoggard

On the surface, 8 players may not seem like much, and certainly none of the above names are legendary talents, however think of the impact these USFL players made on the Browns of the late 1980's.

Frank Minnifield teamed with Hanford Dixon to give the Browns the best cornerback duo in the entire league. Because of Minnifield and Dixon's man coverage skills, the Browns defense could generate a consistent pass rush and was among the top units in the league for a few seasons. Mike Johnson was never a spectacular player, but he provided consistent, smart play at middle linebacker for several seasons. Throw in the depth that lineman Sam Clancy (of *Jets Crash - Browns Survive* fame) and DB Mark Harper provided and the USFL was very kind to the Browns D.

Another note...the addition of D.D. Hoggard to the list solely represents my nostalgic views towards him. Hoggard was often the 48th man on the roster and usually bounced between the roster and practice squad during his Browns tenure. Outside of the usual fan favorites, Hoggard was pretty much my favorite player on the team. I've always had a soft spot for the underdog....which is good considering I was christened a Browns fan 30 years ago.

As for the offensive additions, Kevin Mack was the original Jerome Bettis, minus the great offensive line and self-serving, cartoonish personality. Or perhaps Mack was Christian Okoye-lite. Either way, Mack provided the Browns with a great short running game before the physical style of his play essentially broke his body down. Sound familiar? As for Fike, he played a variety of roles along the offensive

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line and was fairly productive.



Where Have you Gone, Vaughn Johnson?

So in flashing forward to 2009, what is the point of this hopeless reminiscing? Obviously, there is no league like the USFL around today to draw talent from. At best, we are left with the potential for a new college-based league and another Spring creation that will likely fold within 5 years. The only way a team like Cleveland will become a consistent winner is through solid drafting. Speaking of

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which, if you look at the list of ex-USFL names who contributed in Cleveland, it reads almost exactly like the Browns first draft under Eric Mangini.

The USFL brought the Browns an offensive and defensive lineman, along with a running back, linebacker, punter, and two defensive backs. Looking at the Browns' 2009 draft, the team took an offensive lineman, running back, two linebackers, two wideouts and two defensive backs. Except for the wide receivers, the Browns' USFL bounty in the 80's was the equivalent of one regular year of college drafting. Add to this the fact that the players had better competition at the league level which prepared them further for the NFL.

Imagine if the Browns had this kind of talent infusion today?

But I can't help but optimistically try to link Mangini with Schottenheimer. Marty inherited a bad team in 1984 and efficiently built it up into a winner in the span of two years. Schottenheimer did this with solid, unspectacular defense and a conservative offense led by a local boy QB. Sound familiar? Mangini is inheriting another bad team and is taking a similar approach to building the team through toughness and intelligence.

So, what is the modern day solution to the swelling talent gap that resides in Cleveland? Perhaps Eric Mangini has already begun the process on draft day. In making a move with the Jets, Mangini added three players, Kenyon Coleman, Abram Elam and Brett Ratliff, who all could play a role in 2009. By most accounts, this was a steal for the Browns as they added two sure starters and another player with potential. In 2009 terms, this could be considered a USFL haul. As for the trade itself, it has to qualify as a success, unless an Alex Mack body part goes LeCharles Bentley in training camp and Mark Sanchez becomes a heterosexual Peyton Manning in New York.

As for the future, it is very possible that Eric Mangini hooks up again with the Jets Mike Tannebaum to make another deal. Perhaps Braylon Edwards or Derek Anderson will be on the move. In any proposed deal, you have to imagine that Mangini would like to grab another couple of his ex-players. Perhaps a Thomas Jones trade could bring in more loyal Mangini guys from New York. Also, if you consider the offseason moves the Browns made as financial values, then Eric Barton, David Bowens and the rest could be a mini-haul, or at least a cheap one.

In saying all of this, one thing is clear. The Browns need talent. Anything they can

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do to acquire talent is worth doing. While reminiscing for the sake of nostalgia will not improve the team, perhaps the Browns can look to the USFL era for a reminder of the importance of new blood. Now is not the time to sit still.

Perhaps the next Frank Minnifield is waiting to be discovered.