

The Cleveland Browns just held what seems like their 12th voluntary camp and, as usual, it's not all peaches and beans. Even when they shouldn't be making news, they do and even when it should be good it isn't. The contract squabble with Josh Cribbs took another somewhat unexpected turn with the release of Cribbs' statement purportedly explaining his side of the impending contract standoff. Gary talks about it in his latest edition of Lingering Items.



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Even when they shouldn't be making news, they do and even when it should be good it isn't. The contract squabble with Josh Cribbs took another somewhat unexpected turn with the release of [Cribbs's statement](#) purportedly explaining his side of the impending contract standoff. In one sense it is dismissed as a negotiating ploy, which it clearly is. But in another sense it is something worth noting because it speaks to a loss of respect for an organization in whom so few have respect these days anyway.

Cribbs' statement sent a cautionary message to Randy Lerner as well as head coach Eric Mangini and general manager George Kokinis that

this organization better start standing for something or it will soon fall for anything. The initial, tough stance of Mangini and Lerner indicate it will be the latter and not the former.

If any member of the current Browns has credibility with the dwindling fan base, it's Cribbs. He plays hard on every play and has always been willing to take on whatever assignment he's been given, no matter how ridiculous. When Cribbs starts calling out the owner for treating him like "collateral damage" one has to wonder what impact that will have inside the locker room. Cribbs has essentially laid down the gauntlet by putting his own credibility on the line. He doesn't seem worried that he'll come out on the short end of that battle.

If the Browns don't renegotiate the contract, you can only expect the situation to escalate and eventually resonate. Cribbs took a preemptive strike at Lerner et. al that either forces them to step up and do the right thing, which, according to Cribbs, is to pay him fairly relative to his unidentified peers, or stare him down and risk alienating the emotional center of the team thereby putting a serious crimp on Mangini's plan to transform the franchise.

I can't help wonder, though, why Cribbs has taken it to this level this soon. It's May. The only leverage point he has right now is to withhold his services from workouts that aren't contractually required. That's hardly a stinging rebuke. No one will give this much thought until at least training camp. That's when the stakes heighten for both sides. If fans of the Browns understand anything at this point it's the outcome on the field of a team that doesn't properly prepare.

The other thing I wonder about is the logic underlying Cribbs' emotional statement. On many levels it doesn't make sense. Let's start with the premise. Cribbs is not a restricted free agent but a player one-third of the way through a contract he signed that pays him over \$6 million. No one put a gun to his head to sign it. To now claim, as he does, that the contract is one-sided is disingenuous. As I recall, he was all smiles when he originally signed it.

But beyond just this simple point, Cribbs sets up the straw man argument that he shouldn't be held accountable for breaching his contract since the owners breach contracts all the time. Really? Give me an example. Just one. The reality is that the collective bargaining agreement keeps the owners feet to the fire far more than it does to the players and every meritorious allegation of a breach of contract made by the players has been rectified in binding arbitration.

When it comes to not honoring contracts, it's really the players that hold the inglorious history of walking away from their signed commitments. Every year there are handfuls of players in every sport that refuse to abide by their signed contracts in order to force their employers into newer more lucrative ones. I'm not making a value judgment on the tactic, just stating a fact.

Besides, it was Cribbs who decided to get into this business in the first place. He can portray himself a knave, but he's well armed for the battle. His agent may have been born at night, but it wasn't last night. It's a fair fight.

Perhaps the biggest flaw in Cribbs' logic is that he only has 10 or so years to make the most money he can to last him the rest of his life. Being a professional athlete does not carry the implied promise that when your playing career ends you can blissfully retire without ever having to work again. If Cribbs defies the odds and plays until he's 35, why should he assume that his earnings during his career should be enough to sustain him until he's 95? If this dispute really is about whether or not Cribbs shouldn't have to enter real life in his mid-30s without ever having to seek gainful employment again, he'll lose the fans as quick as he got them on his side.

It's understandable that Cribbs is upset with what he feels is a lack of integrity by Browns' management. But it's not as if Cribbs shouldn't have seen that coming. Cribbs has been with the team for four seasons and in that time he's had a front row seat to all manner of dysfunction that has been the Browns. The only surprise in any of this is that Cribbs is surprised.

Ultimately, I blame the agent. Taking your case directly to the media is Negotiation 101 so the fact that Cribbs issued a statement isn't a surprise. But J.R. Rickert needs to do a far better job of controlling his client than he's done to this point or at least find a better voice through which he can articulate what may be a legitimate dispute.

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Flying further under the radar screen than Cribbs is kicker Phil Dawson, also a no-show at Camp Mangini. Neither Dawson nor his agent are

saying much about why he's not there, but the sense is that it, too, is related to some contractual unhappiness.

The Dawson situation is harder to figure than Cribbs. Dawson certainly has been one of the more steady players in franchise history. Moreover as he ages his performance is getting better not deteriorating. For his career, he's made 83% of field goals attempted. That places him 8<sup>th</sup> on the list of active kickers, a mere 4% behind the leader. For perspective, that means Dawson would have had to make about 5 more field goals over his entire career in order to be active leader, something that doesn't seem all that improbable considering how many times in the last several seasons former head coach Romeo Crennel trotted Dawson out at the end of a half to attempt a 50+ field goal. It's also worth noting that of the 7 kickers currently ahead of Dawson on field goal accuracy only two, Matt Stover and Nate Kaeding, have played at least 5 seasons.

Dawson, like Cribbs, is in the middle of a multi-year, multi-million dollar contract. Like Cribbs, Dawson probably has perused the various salary databases available and has determined that his salary isn't keeping pace with his peers. According to the USA Today database, for example, Dawson is the 23<sup>rd</sup> highest paid kicker/punter in the league from a base salary standpoint. His annual salary on a contract that still has two years to go is around \$1 million.

Kaeding and Stover are ahead of Dawson in salary, but

not by much. But several others, including Adam Vinatieri, Jason Hanson and Olindo Mare, to name three, are well ahead of Dawson in salary. In each case, Dawson has had the better career, at least when it comes to accuracy. Dawson has had the disadvantage of toiling in obscurity in Cleveland for mostly bad teams and thus hasn't had the opportunity to kick in really big games, like Vinatieri. But that doesn't diminish Dawson's accomplishments. If anything, Dawson has been even more important to his team because he's often the only thing standing between the team and another shutout.

I'm certain his agent, Neil Cornich, has these and an armload of other statistics to make his case, a case which is easily made. But the broader picture is that this is another contract to be renegotiated, which is why it plays directly into what happens with Cribbs.

If the Browns sit down and renegotiate with Cribbs they can't avoid a similar discussion with Dawson without alienating him further and vice versa. That doesn't mean the Browns should draw a line in the sand against renegotiating. It just means that as with most everything else, the situation is far more complicated than just

shoveling a few more dollars a player's way.

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Finally Braylon Edwards and I have found common ground. It had to happen eventually.

Edwards, talking as if he had another choice, told the media that he really wants to be in Cleveland this season if only to atone for a miserable 2008 season. He's right, it was miserable.

Edwards' impromptu press conference was vintage Edwards and what makes him such an enigma. He was well spoken, as usual, and almost humble. He seemed to have a full grasp on the business issues regarding the frequency with which his name was brought up in trade talks. He even took the positive approach by saying that the Browns must really value him to not have essentially given him away.

But bubbling just below the façade of the thoughtful receiver he portrayed, Edwards knows that this is a make or break season for him and he better respond. Otherwise he enters his free agent off season with all the leverage of a Wally Szerbiak.

Frankly, it matters little what Edwards' motivation might be this season, just so long as he has some. As bad as Derek Anderson was, as bad as the offensive line was and as bad as the defense was, Edwards was the poster child for all that bedeviled the team last season, and for good reason.

His approach in training camp was lackadaisical, to say the least. He exhibited all the passion and commitment of a guy who felt he had already arrived before he even left the station. If he can turn that around, whether motivated by pride or money, the Browns will be a better team automatically.

Edwards as Pro Bowl talent and has exhibited it. He also has a Pro Bowl caliber ego that tends to rob him of



reason too often. If he can channel the former and discard the latter, at least for one season, then whoever is behind center will blossom. And if that happens, the applause and cheers will return and suddenly no one will be holding a perceived grudge against him because of his Michigan roots.

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As the incumbent players begin to test the mettle of the new regime, this week's question to ponder is which Browns player will be the next to go public with a grievance?