

Lingering Items - Broncos Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Friday, September 25 2009 7:00 PM -

The news that the Cleveland Browns waived tight end Martin Rucker was greeted by most with a mere yawn or at best a knowing smirk. Either way it's below the radar when there are far bigger issues to deal with. But, really, in some sense isn't the cutting of Rucker a marker for the biggest issue facing this team, a deep and abiding lack of talent? Gary touches on that, depression amongst Browns fans, and Eric Mangini not holding himself to the same standards he's holding his players to.



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But, really, in some sense isn't the cutting of Rucker a marker for the biggest issue facing this team, a deep and abiding lack of talent?

Rucker was one of former general manager Phil Savage's classic picks. Thinking, as he usually did, that he was once again outsmarting the rest of the league, he traded a 2009 third round pick to Dallas for another fourth round pick in 2008, which turned into Rucker.

If Savage were still around, the fact that he wasted a third round pick on another bust would be a dischargeable offense. Hopefully it will probably keep him further unemployed.

As the Plain Dealer

reported, Savage was well aware that Rucker couldn't block, which is something most teams want from tight ends, dismissing his complete lack of skills by challenging the reporter to name a tight end that could block.

Since Rucker wasn't drafted to fill the role of a traditional tight end, he basically was competing for the position of slow receiver.

In that context his being waived was inevitable.

The Browns already have plenty of those.

The larger issue though is what Savage did to this franchise in the process of making such a bone-headed move. Essentially, the Browns had no 2008 draft. It was mortgaged for three defensive linemen, a quarterback and a linebacker in the persons of, Shaun Rogers, Corey Williams, Ahtyba Rubin, Brady Quinn, and Alex Hall, respectively.

Of that group, the only one to contribute meaningfully so far has been Rogers. The level of his contribution though is hard to gauge.

He was chosen for the Pro Bowl on the strength of a season in which he anchored a defensive line that was one of the worst in the league.

Evidently it would have been far worse without Rogers but even with him the team went 4-12. Maybe they go 3-13 or 2-14 without him, as if that would really would have mattered.

Corey Williams hasn't been a bust but neither has he been much of a contributor, mainly due to injuries. Rubin looks like a decent prospect but again this season the defensive line can't stop the run so it's unclear how much of a difference he, Rogers or Williams, singularly or collectively, are making anyway.

Quinn is the team's starting quarterback on an offense without a credible running game or a credible complement of receivers to catch the ball.

He looks bad but there isn't a whole lot of ways to look good, either.

As for Hall, whatever his contributions might be, the Browns linebacking corps is one of the worst in the league.

Do the math on that yourself.

No team can essentially give away draft after draft after draft after draft and expect to be competitive. The Indians' season is a testament to exactly what eventually happens when draft neglect has been committed in serial fashion.

The Browns of this season and last are making a case of overtaking the Indians as the Wikipedia entry for that point.

That gets head coach Eric Mangini off the hook except that it really doesn't. To this point his 2009 draft isn't looking so smart, either.

All the manipulating and cleverness that he tried to exhibit on draft day cost him Mark Sanchez and instead brought the team a rookie center and two receivers who apparently can't even beat out a converted college quarterback and kick returner, even if he is one of the best kick returners in the league.

There also are a couple of linebackers that haven't contributed despite the gaping need the team has at that position and a defensive back that plays on special teams because, again, he can't crack an incredibly weak starting defensive backfield.

Finally, there's a running back who shows promise but hasn't contributed much in two games despite, wait for it, a gaping need at that position as well.

That's not to pass judgment on the Browns 2009 draft class. It has plenty of time to get better and one preseason and two games in is just far too early to judge it to conclusion. But it is fair to suggest that it ought to contributing more considering the alternatives that are playing in their places.

In any case, last year's class is kaput.

Rucker is now gone and forgotten.

But what won't be is what he stands for; another failed draft.

If 2009 turns into another failed draft, just add another few years before the team can even hope to be competitive.

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Does the fact that Coye Francies tried to take on the entire Browns' locker room after being the victim of some sort of prank mean the wheels are starting to fall off the team so soon? Probably not. But of all the comments made about it, the most intriguing was that made by receiver Braylon Edwards when he told reporters, according to the Plain Dealer, "welcome to the Browns' locker room."

In that comment Edwards was clearly telling the collected media, in front of whom the skirmish broke out, that this kind of chaos is de rigueur for the team. Small wonder Mangini doesn't want the media around.

It might be fair to ask why any Browns are playing a prank on any player, no matter how juvenile, instead of concentrating on not suffering their third straight beat down. But that would just be poking at the obvious. What is clear is that despite all the discipline he promised to bring, Mangini is no more in charge of the locker room than his predecessor.

Under former head coach Romeo Crennel, Brady Quinn was the victim of a prank

that he was none too happy about, the shaving of his Sampson-like locks last year. Then there was that little tête-à-tête (that's two French phrases in one item, take that Gladys McCoy) Quinn had with Shaun Smith. That all probably meant that Quinn doesn't have much of a sense of humor or it might mean that neither incident was particularly funny.

But it also meant that Crennel was busy sitting in his office while the players were doing anything but trying to win the next game.

There is a "boys will be boys" element to every team and in sports, the pranks are particularly amateurish, usually involving humiliation. But right now the Browns are being laughed at nationally because their play on the field is a joke.

Now they're also being laughed at nationally because their players can't take a joke.

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The muted response by Browns' fans to last week's loss in Denver can only mean that a large portion of them are already in either stage 4 or 5 of the grieving process. That means some are still depressed by most are in the acceptance phase, which is healthy.

Occasionally I get a random email from someone still in the bargaining stage, as in "if Jamal Lewis can just....and if Quinn can find Edwards...and if Eric Wright becomes the Pro Bowl corner he should be...then this team can make the playoffs" or something like that. But those are far less than they used to be.

The Browns as a franchise died when Art Modell moved them to Baltimore. The new Browns arrived terminally ill, clinging to a ventilator.

The plug was effectively pulled when Randy Lerner took over as owner. The best way to look at it these days is to simply think of Mangini's hire as the equivalent to the team starting over from scratch.

It's a refreshing state of mind, actually.

It makes you realize that it's no longer about trying to keep grandpa alive but about watching a newborn grow.

Whether it has the right parents is open to much debate.

But this truly is a franchise at the moment that is learning to crawl-forward.

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As a bit of a follow-up to an item last week, it is noted that Green Bay New York Jets Minnesota Vikings quarterback Brett Favre has apologized, sort of, for getting his former team, the Jets, and his former coach, Mangini, in trouble with the league. Poor Brett is just apoplectic about having cost them \$150,000 in fines, but not apoplectic enough to reimburse either of them.

Mangini, as usual, has put the whole matter behind him though he never addressed it either. I mention this because it's a fascinating counterpoint to the rather impassioned justification Mangini gave for fining Abram Elam \$1700 for not paying for a \$3 bottle of water at a hotel. Mangini said there is a code of conduct that everyone in every walk of life lives by and his football players should be no different.

In that, of course, Mangini's views are above reproach.

But Mangini is also rather convenient when it comes to the more squishy issues of league rules as they apply to him. Mangini knew full well that he wasn't properly

reporting Favre's injury last year but continued to do it anyway.

He wouldn't have been caught but for Favre's big mouth.

If you're keeping score, that means that Elam's offense wasn't walking out without paying for the water, it was getting caught.

To this point Mangini hasn't substantively spoken about the \$25,000 fine he received from the league. In basically sweeping it away, he creates the impression that he doesn't believe he did anything wrong but there's no use fighting big brother. Maybe he actually feels that way, maybe he doesn't. But either way, Mangini missed a teaching opportunity with his troops that, more than empty words about his players' place in proper society, would have demonstrated exactly why it was proper to fine Elam fine and any other player similarly situated.

Mangini could have done this by the simple act of publicly declaring that his actions last year with respect to Favre were wrong, a violation of the rules for which he was rightly fined and then giving his word that it will never happen again.

Mangini couldn't do that because he lacks that gene. If he did, it wouldn't be Saturday before Browns fans found out that the starting kicker has a serious enough injury that the team was auditioning emergency kickers.

The truth is that Mangini plays the outer boundaries of any rules he simply doesn't like. League rules require that he provide the media reasonable access to the team and he complies with the letter but hardly the spirit. He pressured rookies into taking a 10-hour bus ride, a ride Mangini himself was unwilling to make, skirting again the spirit if not the letter of the collective bargaining agreement. In both cases he's left a bus-load of pissed off people in his wake.

It's a disturbing pattern, actually. There's no problem with Mangini holding his players accountable for not acting like jerks in public.

There is a problem when Mangini is only willing to live by that same code when it's

convenient.

Ethics and integrity aren't about what you do when someone's looking.

They're about what you do when no one is.

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If a team can possibly be a "soft" 2-0 then the Denver Broncos have met that charge. After opening against the Bengals and then the Browns, the Broncos have gotten off to a the kind of start Browns fans can only dream about and, in the process, have given their fans a reason to believe that Pat Bowlen's firing of Mike Shanahan was the right move at the right moment.

It won't last.

Denver's cause will be helped this year by the division they play in, but it won't be helped enough. As long as the Broncos continue to start Kyle Orton as their quarterback, and what choice do they have really, they and their fans will eventually face reality. You can drink all night and not feel like you're drunk, but that doesn't mean you won't have a headache when you wake up in the morning.

The Broncos, frankly, are a borderline pathetic franchise at the moment. They beat the Browns last week because that's what they, like the Steelers, always do.

But there are bills coming due.

Head coach Josh McDaniels decision to trade quarterbacks with the Bears was not just plain dumb, it will become a millstone around his neck when his offense can't keep pace with the better defensive teams in the league.

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When they play the Steelers or the Ravens, take either and give the points.

The Broncos defense may have been able to stifle the Browns offense, but then again I think Ohio State's defense could hold the Browns to under 10 points at the moment. When the Broncos begin facing teams with a legitimate offense, their defense will struggle. The seeds of that struggle were evident even against the Browns.

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The San Francisco 49ers haven't yet signed receiver Michael Crabtree. If the 49ers are smart, they'll let him dangle some more.

The 49ers have made an offer befitting Crabtree's place in the draft but Crabtree wants an offer befitting where he believes he should have gone in the draft.

Eventually he'll sign.

Sitting out the year will result in money he'll never recoup.

All this is a very long set up for this week's question to ponder:

When the 2009 season concludes, who will have more receptions, Crabtree or Brian Robiskie and Mohamed Massaquoi?