

Randy Freaking Lerner. Almost as villified as Art at this point. We want to believe that he's dying inside as much as we are, watching this team founder, resurface and founder again, week after week. We want to believe that he's going to get the winning formula right. Every new coach, every new GM, every smack of the reset button gives Lerner another shot at redemption. At the very least, he's bound to stumble onto some good hires, right? That's what the law of averages says, anyway. Right? Erik Cassano opines.



The Browns have an owner, rumor has it. Rumor has it he also cares about the welfare of his team.

Rumor has it he's a lot more involved than the public realizes, that he comes to the Browns training complex in Berea a couple of times a week, has in-depth conversations with his coach and really, truly wants to know what is going on with his beaten, battered team.

Rumor has it that he wants nothing more than to restore the Browns to the glory of the black and white television era. Rumor has it that he has a heart of gold, uncompromising standards of excellence and a lifelong passion for the franchise his father bequeathed to him.

This is what we want to believe about Randy Lerner. We want to believe that he's dying inside as much as we are, watching this team founder, resurface and founder again, week after week. We want to believe that he's going to get the winning formula right. Every new coach, every new GM, every smack of the reset

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Lerner is a guy worth rooting for. He exhibits none of the activity normally associated with bad ownership. He's not a penny-pinching miser -- quite the opposite, in fact. He's not meddlesome. He doesn't fancy himself a would-be GM. He doesn't fire coaches or front office personnel at the drop of a hat. He doesn't order trades.

Lerner is not a disengaged owner. He does maintain a presence in Berea, and has taken steps to reconnect the team to its history -- the only thing that really gives the Browns name any meaning anymore. He has strengthened the club's connection to team alumni and developed constructive personal relationships with the likes of Jim Brown, who is now a regular presence at games and the team's headquarters. These are the kinds of things that didn't really happen when Lerner's father let Carmen Policy run the show.

In short, Lerner is involved in promoting the Browns name, stays out of the football operations end of things whenever possible, has deep pockets and is willing to spend money. By any basic measurement, that would be the definition of a good owner in the NFL -- in any sport, for that matter.

But with Lerner, it doesn't add up. He's a good man with good intentions whose team produces bad on-field results. It's difficult to pinpoint a single root cause.

The closest anyone can come to a definite diagnosis is poor hiring of team leaders. It's true, but Lerner's philosophy on building a better football team hasn't been anchored in quicksand.

Much ado has been made by fans and media about Lerner's failure to hire a dynamic team president to serve as the organizational overlord -- a role from which Lerner has shied. Lerner did try to go that route in 2004, hiring NFL executive John Collins to run the show from a 30,000-foot level. It backfired when Collins became entangled in a power struggle with Phil Savage. Faced with an either-or proposition, Lerner parted ways with Collins in 2005.

Lerner's football-specific hires haven't come without credentials. They've come from successful NFL organizations. Romeo Crennel and Eric Mangini both

learned at the feet of Bill
Parcells
and Bill
Belichick

. Savage was widely regarded as a draft guru, particularly when it came to amassing defensive talent, as he did with the Ravens.

Mangini's
GM, George
Kokinis
, also comes from Ozzie
Newsome's
gold-standard staff in Baltimore.

This isn't a clueless owner hiring small-college coaches recommended by equally clueless college buddies. Lerner has put time, effort and research into all his hires.

Yet, they've all been busts. Flaming busts, actually. Crennel and Savage were both exposed as woefully lacking in leadership skills.

Mangini
appears headed for the same rocky shore, but about four times as fast as
Crennel
or Savage.

The team is cracking under the weight of the instability. Players have not reacted well in going from Crennel's laid-back coaching style to Mangini's heavy-handed discipline. Rumbblings of players quitting on

Mangini
have already started to surface. If you've watched any of the Browns' first three losses, it's hard to dismiss the possibility of a brewing passive-aggressive player revolt.

Yet, that's exactly why Lerner pursued Mangini. To instill discipline on a team that lacked discipline. Or at least that was the plan.

It's easy to paint Lerner as a fool who is blindly enamored with recreating his version of the Patriots in Cleveland by hiring Belichick's coaching offspring. Of course, if you're going to emulate a team, a three-time Super Bowl winner is a good place to start. It has worked fairly well for the
Cavs

, whose front office philosophies and playbook are heavily influenced by the San Antonio Spurs.

Yet, every decision Lerner has made has ultimately been the wrong decision, building to the net result of a new rebuild every four years or so. If Mangini loses control of this team, the current rebuild might last all of one year.

It's a riddle with no easy answer. Maybe Lerner, between his Long Island home and his controlling interest in English soccer club Aston Villa, isn't attentive enough to the Browns. Maybe he's looking too hard for that one football guru who can singlehandedly turn the Browns around. Maybe he's taking the lazy man's way out of building the Browns.

Maybe his motivation for hanging onto the Browns comes less from a burning desire to turn the team around and more from a sense of duty to the family name. If Lerner sells the Browns after a decade of seldom-interrupted losing, the Lerner name -- and everything his dad worked for all his life -- will be forever tied to the failed ownership of the Browns.

Maybe Lerner just has bad instincts when it comes to making the right hires. He had a chance to put the Browns in a position to hire former Patriots executive Scott Pioli, but Pioli essentially told Lerner that if he were to take the Browns job, he'd scrap the roster and start over. Mangini came along and told Lerner that he could win with most of the current roster intact. Tell the owner what he wants to hear, and ye shall receive.

Mangini

got the Browns gig, and

Pioli

is now in charge of football operations for the Chiefs.

The truth probably contains some element of everything. But what we do know for sure is that this ongoing spin cycle is making all parties involved increasingly dizzy and nauseous. And there is no end in sight.

In the cutthroat world of professional sports, good intentions only get you so far. The Browns are owned by a good man who, for a number of reasons, continually enables failure on the field.

Wins and losses are the bottom line, and to that end, Lerner's ownership has

damaged the Browns and their reputation. Sooner or later, Lerner will need to acknowledge that. And he'll need to realize that, in all likelihood, the best thing he can possibly do for the city and the franchise is to sell the team.