

Performance-Based Privileges

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Back in March of 2007, Randy Lerner told the media then that owning the Browns was a performance-based privilege. He posited the question that if he can't perform as an owner, why should he continue to own the team. In Gary's latest, he says the team has regressed from the time he made that statement, and takes a look at guys he sees as core players now, as opposed to then. Gary also hits on the passing of the trade deadline with no action, and the season ending injury to D'Qwell Jackson.



It may be darkest before the storm, but for Cleveland Browns fans the clouds hanging over their franchise have been so thick for so long it's difficult to remember what the sun once looked like.

The news that linebacker D'Qwell Jackson is not out for the year because of a shoulder injury should have had more of an impact than it actually does. Jackson is a decent player, maybe even the best player on the defense. But the unit already is the worst in the league and has looked bad far more often than it's looked good. How much of an impact can the loss of Jackson or any member of that defense really have?

The other news, of sorts, of the week regarding the Browns relates to what they

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didn't do, as in they didn't trade any more players. No one expected head coach Eric Mangini to trade Josh Cribbs so the fact that the trade deadline passed without any action with him isn't a surprise. But it is a little surprising that something didn't happen at some level, or maybe it's not.

There are a few players on this team that would be immediately useful on other teams; players like Joe Thomas, Josh Cribbs, Shaun Rogers and Dave Zastudil come to mind. You could probably throw Eric Steinbach on that list as well. There also are some players that would be useful down the road to some teams, players like Mohammad Massaquoi, Jerome Harrison, and Alex Mack. There may even be a few others that could find roles on other teams if they were available, players like Brodney Pool, Alex Hall and Eric Wright. But no team is going to give you much or anything for them.

And that's really the point. Mangini isn't rebuilding this team, he's building it from scratch and he has very little to work with and very little to dangle in front of anyone else.

So let's go back for a moment to a time when the last regime was in its salad days and owner Randy Lerner was feeling particularly spry about its prospects; a time when he was more prone to giving interviews.

It was March, 2007 to be exact when Lerner made the rounds of the local newspapers and more or less gave his state of the Browns address, personalizing it a little for each reporter. I wrote about it [here](#) and it's instructive to visit with Rappin' Randy a bit to give some perspective on what hasn't happened since.

Lerner told the media then that owning the Browns was a performance-based privilege. He posited the question that if he can't perform as an owner, why should he continue to own the team. Since then, he's answered his own question, he shouldn't. Don't take my word for it, take his.

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Using the yardstick that Lerner laid out for himself, he said that when Savage took over, there were maybe "five or six or seven" football players on the team, though he left it to others to debate the names. He also said that a team needs about 35 core players in order to be successful. He named 19 players currently on that 2007 roster who fit that category: "I have (Joe) Jurevicius, (Orpheus) Roye, Kellen Winslow, Braylon Edwards, Kamerion Wimbley, Sean Jones, Brodney Pool, Eric [Steinbach], Jamal Lewis, Andra Davis, Charlie Frye, D'Qwell Jackson, Leigh Bodden, Josh Cribbs for special teams certainly if not other, Steve Heiden, and emerging players like Leon Williams, Lawrence Vickers, Jerome Harrison, Travis Wilson."

It's an interesting list for a variety of reasons. It gives insight into what both Lerner and Savage were thinking at the time and in that context explains why Savage really is gone and why Lerner should sell. But more instructive still is the fact that it's just two short seasons later and the only ones still on the team are Wimbley, Pool, Steinbach, Lewis, Jackson, Cribbs, Heiden, Vickers and Harrison. Assuming for the moment that Lerner's assessment on the players was correct, that means that over half of the "core" players are no longer with the team. And of those 9 still remaining, two are now on injured reserve and a third, Wimbley, continues to tease as he's done throughout his career. He's yet to make a real impact.

That means that only two seasons removed from Lerner's assessment, the Browns are utilizing the services of 7 core players at the moment.

If Lerner were still in a talking mood, it would be fascinating to learn how many core players he now sees on this roster and who they might be. Let's speculate.

Starting from Lerner's original list, you have to assume he'd still put Wimbley on it even though nothing's happened in the last two years to make anyone else put the words "Wimbley" and "core player" in the same sentence unless the word "not" also is thrown in. You can also assume that a case can still be made for Pool, a consummate and

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underappreciated professional. Certainly, Steinbach, Jackson, Cribbs and Harrison still qualify. But of those still on the roster and Lerner's original list, the same case can't be made for Lewis, because of his age and, frankly, his diminishing skills, Heiden, because of injuries, and Vickers, because he's easily replaced. (As an aside, I'm not sure how Vickers ever really got on the list, but then just look at Lerner's original list and ask yourself the same question about Leon Williams, Travis Wilson and Charlie Frye.)

Now, from the current roster, you can add in Thomas, Rogers, Zastudil (though Lerner didn't have him on that list in 2007, hmm), Massaquoi, Mack, and Hall. If Lerner's being really generous, he'd add, well, actually, I'm not sure who else he'd add without arousing a howl from the fan base. But assuming that there are a few others, that still puts the team well short of the 19 Lerner targeted in 2007 and well short of the 35 players the team supposedly needs to be competitive.

In other words, in 2007 the Browns supposedly were roughly halfway toward the required complement of core players. Now, they are maybe a third of the way there, depending on whether or not you're an easy grader. (Another aside: I recognize mightily that Lerner's original list was ridiculous. The 2008 season bore that out. Still, it's a useful premise for purposes of illustrating the far larger point.)

The other thing that's noticeable about the list of current so-called core players is the lack of any quarterback on it. Lerner originally had Frye on his list but he obviously didn't foresee that Savage would dump him a few months later after a bad opening game. When Derek Anderson emerged in 2007 in place of Frye he certainly would have been on that list but his 2008 season, his inability to secure the starting spot going into 2009 and the fact that he's currently the worst rated quarterback in the league removes him from any consideration as a core player.

There was a time, probably last season, when Lerner would have put Brady Quinn on that list, but he isn't there anymore. Mangini has effectively written off Quinn and will dump him in the offseason, apparently with Lerner's blessing. That leaves Brett Ratliff. Mangini may like him well enough but if a 3rd string

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quarterback really is considered a core player on this team then just forfeit the rest of the games now and bring the season to a close.

Mangini will be finding out, if he doesn't know already, that there aren't enough hours in the day or days on the calendar to fix this mess in any reasonable time frame. You can constantly churn a roster as most NFL teams do, you can listen to the siren song of free agency, you can gather draft picks like they're acorns on a fall day, and you still can't go from 12 core players to 35 in just a few short seasons.

The other part of this treadmill is that as the years pass, the core players you once had drop off the list for a variety of reasons, including injury, age and salary demands. They also drop off because as impatience kicks in, the temptation to trade one away for the chance on getting two more can be irresistible.

For example, Savage traded Bodden for Rogers. Rogers is the better player, certainly, but it did nothing toward the goal of increasing the nucleus of the team. All Savage did was trade one core player for another. (Another aside because I feel the need to explain: I don't think Bodden was a core player, Lerner did, that's all. Lerner was wrong. He often is.) When Mangini traded Edwards for Chansi Stuckey and Jason Trusnik, the team took a step backward from the standpoint of building its base. Maybe Stuckey and Trusnik eventually become core players, but they aren't now. Ditto for the draft picks received in exchange for Edwards.

And that's how this gamble really works. Trading anyone worth trading

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on this current roster would have done little for building a stronger base. Giving away marginal players for late round picks has no promise of accomplishing anything for the long term and nothing for the short term.

For Mangini to effectively accelerate the long process of building the base he's going to have to develop some of these marginal players into core players and then he's going to have to get awfully lucky with the draft in a hurry. That's the task Lerner really has thrown at the feet of his new head coach. It was the same task Savage had and failed at. And if Lerner is every bit as good as assessing the ability of someone to make this transformation as he was at identifying the team's core in 2007 or picking the last architect, then something tells me those dark clouds won't be dissipating anytime soon. And, for good measure, just know that in Cleveland if ownership is indeed a performance-based privilege, it's apparently a fleeting and ill-defined concept.