

Fighting The Wrong Fight

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Whether it qualifies as irony or just bad timing is hard to say. But on the day that the Cleveland Browns announced the hiring of Mike Holmgren to be their president of football operations came word that former general manager George Kokinis has filed for arbitration over his on-going dispute with the Browns. The two events couldn't represent the schizophrenic nature of this franchise any more accurately. Gary Benz talks about it in his latest piece for us ...



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Meanwhile, many fans sit blissfully unaware of the things that really shape this franchise. Instead the focus is more simplistic. The team has won two straight games, which seemed impossible a month ago. There were record breaking performances by Jerome Harrison and Josh Cribbs, which likewise seemed next to impossible. At least some aspects of the team seems to be rallying, in a sense, around head coach Eric Mangini. It's evidence of progress all around, which is apparently all Browns fans ever really want.

Giving due recognition that things aren't quite as bleak this past Monday as most Monday's during the season, this team is still 3-11, with two victories against teams every bit as bad as them. The progress has been incremental but started from such an embarrassingly low point that walking and chewing gum at the same

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time would have qualified as progress as well.

But none of that is really the point of the moment as another embarrassing chapter in Browns history has been visited upon this team even as it begins to steady itself with the hiring of Holmgren.

At issue between the Browns and Kokinis is about \$4 million he claims is still owed on a contract that the Browns refuse to honor. Kokinis believes the Browns didn't live up to certain promises made in order to induce him to leave the Baltimore Ravens. The Browns claim Kokinis was fired for cause, the crime apparently being that he wasn't deferential enough to his key subordinate, Mangini. The demand for arbitration is standard in these kinds of disputes between members of management of a NFL franchise with Commissioner Roger Goodell or his designee serving as the arbitrator.

The probable end game for the Browns is to find a way to pay Kokinis less than what remains on his contract and still claim victory. It's an awful goal.

What makes this incident out of character for the Browns is that to this point, Lerner has mostly been a patsy for everyone else he's sent packing, from Butch Davis through Phil Savage. In the process Lerner has literally parted with millions of his own money as a kind of toll he's chosen to pay for the benefit of running his franchise in such a scattered fashion.

The question is thus begged, why take a stand now against Kokinis? Parenthetically one is left to wonder what role, if any, Mangini has in Lerner's new found if ill placed set of stones?

Of all the lousy decisions Lerner has made with respect to this franchise, probably the worst was signing off on the hiring of Kokinis and that has nothing to do with Kokinis' competence. It has everything to do with the manner in which he was

hired, which is to say ass backwards.

For reasons that Lerner won't ever explain, he let Mangini hire his own boss. What is even less clear is why he thought this situation would work. It's understandable that Mangini would look to someone with whom he was both familiar and could control. It's why he went to Kokinis in the first place.

But in order to have the opportunity to hire Kokinis, who was under contract with the Baltimore Ravens at the time, Mangini/Lerner had to promise him a promotion from his previous job as the Ravens' director of pro personnel. That meant bringing him in as general manager with final authority over football-related decisions such as the composition of the final roster.

In other words, it really was a situation that was on a collision course with itself. Mangini obviously felt that he was the final authority on any and all personnel decisions, irrespective of what Kokinis' contract said and probably for good reason. After all, Mangini was hired first and more importantly was responsible for perhaps the biggest personnel decision of all, the hiring of the general manager.

At the very least you can attribute this implosion to incredible naïveté on behalf of each protagonist. More likely, it was the inevitable clash that comes with promising two people the same thing.

Either way, the ultimate responsibility for this mess lies at the feet of Lerner. Certainly he had the best of intentions but his decision making in this regard was clearly too simplistic and ill informed. That's why it's so puzzling that Lerner would have let his dirty laundry get aired even to this slight extent.

It really matters little how strongly Mangini may feel about Kokinis' alleged non-performance as house puppet or how strongly Mangini may be pushing Lerner to take this stand. Litigation always start out as an issue of honor and

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always ends up as an issue of money.

But this case lacks even any issue of honor. There is no overarching principle to uphold or moral imperative to enforce. Inside the league the word already is out that Kokinis got a raw deal and rather than try and make a half-hearted attempt at turning around this perception, Lerner would be far better served by paying the money and moving forward.

The fact that the Browns already drew a line in the sand, even if they eventually erase it, comes come at the expense of the lingering ill will that stance will create. The credibility jolt they got with the Holmgren hiring will have taken another unnecessary hit and for no good reason.

Hopefully when cooler heads will prevail, Lerner's new general counsel, Fred Nance, will explain to Lerner that at the moment is that it's starting to look like the Browns have a problem keeping their promises. If the allegations regarding Kokinis sound similar to those being made by Josh Cribbs, perhaps that's not an accident except that in Cribbs' case he was relying only on verbal promises and Kokinis actually was smart enough to get his in writing.

That isn't a good message to send to prospective hires, be they in the front office or on the field. Only those without other viable employment options will tend to take a risk on that kind of atmosphere. Is this the paradigm that the Browns really want to establish for Holmgren?

Lerner seems to now be doing his level best to establish that this is not only a credible franchise but relevant, but he should know that it is a huge mistake for anyone within the Browns organization to spend another minute busying themselves with events like this that represent a step in the exact wrong direction.

With Holmgren on board, these kinds of problems should become a thing of the

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past and that's where this one belongs. Yet, until that happens, this event really is the last thing this franchise needed at the moment and yet it now seems like it's become the most important thing it's working on.