

Looking For Presents That Aren't There

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, December 23 2009 7:00 PM -

When Cleveland Browns head coach Eric Mangini looks under his Christmas tree this year, the present he'd like most but probably won't see is the one from new club president Mike Holmgren with a card inside telling him that he's being retained for the remainder of his contract. If you want early insight into why Holmgren likely plans no such gift just look to Randy Lerner. Specifically, look to the reasoning behind why Lerner brought in Holmgren. Gary Benz talks about it in his latest column.



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Without intending, I suspect, to be disrespectful to Mangini it is interesting that Lerner's often repeated refrain has been that he needed to bring in a serious, credible leader for the franchise. It's one of the few quotable things he's said all season, actually.

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Meanwhile, back in Berea, Mangini hearing those words probably texted his agent "WTF?" Undoubtedly Mangini had to feel like he was already the serious, credible sort to Lerner, particularly after he was able to oust former friend George Kokinis with Lerner's blessing.

After enduring all sorts of slings and arrows from every corner, this one included, for letting a once proud franchise essentially become the Los Angeles Clippers of the NFL because of all his bungling, Lerner apparently had enough. He learned, albeit a few months too late, that Mangini wasn't a serious, credible leader of a franchise and likely never was going to be that person.

Lerner courted Mangini last off season with the drunken confidence a 20-something courts a woman beyond his reach in a bar as the evening grows late. But in the clear and sober light of day he awoke to find that Mangini was not necessarily the next great thing. He was simply a coach that had just been fired.

But beyond just that stark portrayal, Lerner came to realize that Mangini arrived in Cleveland with plenty of baggage, some deservedly earned some not, and has spent most of his time since accumulating more. More importantly, though, he came to find that Mangini was something of an outcast in established NFL circles.

When it became clear that it was Mangini that ratted out his former mentor, Bill Belichick, for secretly taping opposing coaches signals during a game, it caused the league all sorts of headaches. Belichick clearly had violated the rules, irrespective of whether or not the rules make much sense. Not to digress too far on that issue, just let me put it this way: it's not a violation of the U.S. Constitution if a police officer decides to tape your secret rendezvous at the local park and use it against you in court but it is a violation of NFL rules for opposing coaches to essentially do the same thing.

But further to the point, the league had to undertake an investigation and mete out

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punishment against Belichick, something it didn't particularly relish not because it's Belichick but because the NFL doesn't ever want to look like it has any problems.

Whatever you might feel about Mangini's decision to turn whistleblower, the outcome certainly cost him his spot on the playground. To other coaches, other owners, other players, Mangini was a guy you had to keep your eye on and not for the right reasons. Whatever credibility he might have been building in the NFL was lost over this incident, again fair or not.

Fast forward to his arrival in Cleveland. Fans were already skeptical of getting what they viewed as a retread and not a particularly successful retread at that. Then came all the other incidents, chronicled several times here and elsewhere, that gave fans far more reasons to be suspicious than welcoming. If you were a crisis communications consultant, you could use Mangini's arrival and early tenure here as a case study on how not to establish credibility in a new situation.

The culmination of all these incidents, none of which individually were fatal but collectively were overwhelming, caused Lerner to realize that nationally and locally this franchise wasn't being taken seriously. More to the point, it caused Lerner to realize that Mangini, sitting alone and overseeing all he could survey, was not going to be the person to change that perception. If this franchise becomes successful under Lerner everyone will look back to this particular insight of Lerner's as the turning point.

Perhaps, though, the clearer sign or signs of Holmgren's intentions regarding Mangini can be found in the total lack of restrictions Lerner placed on Holmgren in offering him the job. It was this absence of any strings that ultimately caused Holmgren to abandon Seattle and all the comforts it held for him personally for Cleveland.

The only reasonable conclusion to draw from this is that Lerner isn't wedded to

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the Mangini way in the least. That isn't to say he isn't a fan of what Mangini's been doing, but it is to say that he's indifferent to whether or not Holmgren wants to blow it up and start over. That alone doesn't bode well for Mangini on any level.

Think what you will about Mangini's vaunted process but what's undeniable is that it hasn't yet been anything more than a working hypothesis. The field tests conducted over the last 4 seasons have yielded mixed results, at best. More importantly, Mangini's theories on some of the most basic levels are far different than Holmgren's and his have proven far more successful over a longer period of time.

Listening to Mangini in his press conferences lately, it almost sounds like he understands that dynamic pretty clearly. He may be confident of his own process and supportive of his own efforts and decisions during the year, but he surely isn't delusional enough to think that Holmgren is simply going to work from the script Mangini drafted and then tweak things around the edges.

The reason Holmgren was able to parlay the sum total of all of his experiences into his current position is because he has been successful. It would be startling, to say the least, were Holmgren to suddenly abandon his collective beliefs in what makes a franchise successful just to accommodate a head coach whose been in his job for just one year.

Mangini and the fans may or may not be seeing some actual growth this season, it's hard to tell. After all, this team still has one fewer wins than last season. But it's not as if anything Mangini's done has developed much of a root system. If there is going to be a reset, better now than two years down the road.

Then, of course, for Mangini the most uncomfortable sign of all at the moment is the deafening sound of silence from Holmgren or Lerner about any of these key issues. In this case, silence isn't a friend to Mangini. Maybe next week, once

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Holmgren has spent his last Christmas for awhile in Seattle and hops Lerner's plane to Cleveland, he'll have more to say. But right now, Mangini is twisting in the wind, kind of like how he kept Brady Quinn and Derek Anderson twisting in the wind all preseason.

As the Holmgren era kicks off in earnest next week, Mangini's fate will be decided sooner rather than later. But as he digs under his Christmas for the present that's not going to be there, he can take comfort in if not learn something from the words of Greg Lake: The Christmas we get we deserve.