

## What Success Looks Like

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, December 28 2009 7:00 PM -

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It's been a rough go of things for Randy Lerner as the Browns owner ever since he took over the reigns of the team after his father Al passed away. In Gary Benz's latest, he says this has a lot to do with the fact that Randy has been in over his head from day one. But with the hire of new President Mike Holmgren now official, Gary says Lerner has finally taken his first real step towards putting together a successful organization to overcome his weakness. Gary thinks this is a great first step. But that it's not enough. And that the next steps will be even harder.



If you were looking for just the right metaphor for the Cleveland Browns' season and perhaps the Cleveland sports scene in general, you couldn't do much better than Sunday's victory against the Oakland Raiders.

With nothing on the line, which is usually the case when it comes to Cleveland sports, the Browns emerged as the same jumbled mess, albeit a jumbled mess with a 3-game winning streak when it probably matters least. It's the usual shot of optimism that Cleveland fans get just about the time they're convinced all is lost, like a great September by the Indians after a miserable April through August.

Focusing on these small wins is just the kind of thinking in this town that often predominates over the longer view. It keeps coaches and general managers in place longer than they deserve because Cleveland fans don't have much of a reference point for what real success looks like.

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Actually that isn't true.

The Cleveland Cavaliers, with Dan Gilbert as owner and Danny Ferry as general manager, have put together an organization not just worth admiring but emulating. It helps that they have the world's best player in LeBron James, but James could easily have gone the way of Kevin Garnett in Minnesota without a good, solid organization behind him to complement his many skills.

Yet fans rarely stop to contemplate the reasons for the Cavs success beyond just the superficial but are more than willing to fly-speck the Browns to find lasting optimism for the future in even the smallest accomplishments. That's a mistake.

Here's what we do know about the Cavs success and why, for whatever transient good feeling Sunday's Brown win brings, the Browns are still light years away from a meaningful positive comparison.

It starts with the owner and flows through a strong general manager.

Both team owners are well-heeled but being well-heeled doesn't automatically translate into success. There is a world of difference between Gilbert's money and Lerner's money even if it spends the same.

Gilbert's wealth is self-made. He came from a relatively modest upbringing and on his own initiative founded his own company. He worked hard to build that company up from its own modest beginnings. In the process he found out what works and what doesn't. Most lessons worth learning aren't in books but in the failures and successes of everyday living and working. It's served him well in building his next business, the Cavs.

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Lerner's wealth is inherited. That doesn't make him a bad guy. In fact, Lerner's a pretty regular guy considering the trappings of his life from birth to now. But he's never had to work at either acquiring or keeping that wealth. His most significant accomplishment in business is actually selling the company his father built. In the process, he's never had much of an opportunity to figure out what works and what doesn't. Never having been anything more than a token figurehead in any business endeavor, he's had precious little chance to learn the lessons worth learning.

It shouldn't be a surprise, then, that Lerner was so ill-equipped to own the Browns. Conceptually he may have understood that the only football knowledge he had was that gotten from the backs of the bubble gum cards he collected as a kid, but he had no idea how to actually put together a successful organization to overcome his weaknesses. He'd never done it before.

When Lerner finally decided he had enough of all the ill will this season had brought, it represented a healthy admission of his own past failures. Grabbing Mike Holmgren in the way that Gilbert grabbed Ferry demonstrated that Lerner was finally starting to grasp some of the most basic business concepts that make an organization, any organization, successful.

It's a great first step. It's not enough.

The next steps will be even harder. For Lerner that means appreciating his role as the organization's North Star. For Holmgren, that means establishing some organizational bright lines.

Gilbert is an active owner but he's not activist, except on the fringes. He sets an operational imperative that places customer service and excellence in execution at its forefront. When you enter the Q, those touches are everywhere.

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Neither active nor activist, Lerner has failed to establish any particular operational imperatives for his franchise. Customer service and excellence in execution are mostly an afterthought. When you enter Cleveland Browns Stadium, Lerner's failures on these front are everywhere.

For Holmgren, he doesn't need to be the next Bill Parcells. It will do simply if he becomes the Browns' version of Ferry.

Holmgren isn't likely to ever have the same luck or luxury in being able to build a team around the NFL's version of James. That kind of player rarely exists in any sport. But Holmgren will have a chance to apply the product of his collective experiences to building a team and an organization that reflect his vision in the way Gilbert and Ferry have.

That doesn't start with appointing a head coach with an outsized personality who believes that it's my way or the Long Island Expressway. It starts first with creating a set of principles then finding the pieces and parts.

Ferry inherited Mike Brown, but only technically. Gilbert hired Brown and Ferry came along just a few weeks later, although the timing was more than coincidental. Gilbert a successful businessman with an understanding of what was needed, developed a vision and found the pieces that fit. He wasn't an owner in search of a superstar coach with the next great idea, just an owner in search of those who would execute the course he set.

Say what you will about Brown's coaching, but he never makes himself the story. It's always about the team and its principles that Gilbert established and Ferry oversees. The Cavs aren't just a team with one goal but a team that to a person can recite how that goal will be achieved. Everyone is on exactly the same page.

Say what you will about Mangini's coaching, but if this season's proven anything

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it's that he's almost always the story. Everything revolves around Mangini in a way that isn't healthy. As a result, the players aren't always reading from the same book, let alone the same page.

For Holmgren and this organization to be successful, that has to end. No team can sustain that kind of self-created drama on a daily basis and be successful. If that means Mangini is sacrificed for the greater good, then so be it.

Lerner is never going to set the vision. He doesn't have that kind of experience. It falls upon Holmgren to have the same courage of his own convictions that Gilbert and Ferry have and be willing to start anew from that imperative rather than try to jerry-rig them into an existing organization that is not of his own creation.

Cleveland fans have seen it work once. It really can happen again.