

It would be so easy for Josh Cribbs to look like the good guy in his contract dispute with the Browns. He has been told to play the role of the good soldier on numerous occasions. The ongoing message from Browns management -- in all its changing forms -- to Cribbs has been "Do what is asked of you, and we'll take care of you when the time is right." And he has. Then Mike Holmgren officially began his job as the new team president, and Cribbs knew the man he needed to talk to was in town. One of the first acts of the Holmgren regime was indeed to offer Cribbs a new contract. But it wasn't anything close to what Cribbs and his agents had in mind.



It would be so easy for Josh Cribbs to look like the good guy in his contract dispute with the Browns.

He has been told to play the role of the good soldier on numerous occasions. The ongoing message from Browns management -- in all its changing forms -- to Cribbs has been "Do what is asked of you, and we'll take care of you when the time is right."

Cribbs has done all that and one heck of a lot more, last month virtually dragging the Browns to their first win over the Steelers in six years. With an NFL record eight career kickoff returns for touchdowns to go with punt return scores and a mastery of the kick coverage game,

Cribbs

has already cemented himself as quite possibly the greatest non-kicking special teams player the league has ever seen. His playmaking

ability out of the "wildcat" formation on offense is an extension of the quick moves and superb field vision he displays on kick returns.

He is, quite simply, a unique talent. You can certainly make a case that within the past half-decade, Cribbs and left tackle Joe Thomas have already staked their claim as the best Browns players of the expansion era.

Now, Cribbs wants his salary to match his accomplishments and abilities. No harm there. Three years ago, he signed a six-year, \$6.8 million deal that included a \$2 million signing bonus. For a young player who was signed as an undrafted free agent from Kent State in 2005, that was big money and big-time security.

But this year, with Cribbs a certifiable NFL star, the \$600,000 he made this year looks relatively paltry. He wants starting receiver money, like Chicago's Devin Hester -- one of the few return men in the league who is in

Cribbs

' class. Hester signed a four-year deal in 2008 worth up to \$40 million. But Hester has been exactly that this year -- a starting receiver.

Cribbs

flopped as a starting receiver, and outside of kick returns and coverages, is relegated to taking direct snaps a few times a game.

Cribbs began to make waves over his contract in the second half of the season. He put a self-dictated end-of-season deadline on getting a new deal. That didn't happen. Then Mike Holmgren officially began his job as the new team president, and Cribbs knew the man he needed to talk to was in town.

One of the first acts of the Holmgren regime was indeed to offer Cribbs a new contract. But it wasn't anything close to what

Cribbs

and his agents had in mind. The Browns reportedly put an offer on the table worth about \$1.4 million per year.

Better than \$600,000? Certainly. The type of money that a game-changer like Cribbs should be making in the NFL? Probably not.

Which is why Cribbs could have very easily spun this situation 100 percent in his favor within the court of public opinion.

It was a lowball offer. It was insulting, as Cribbs' agents declared. It reeked of a new management regime hastily shoving an offer across the table to see if Cribbs would bite. If the Browns were going to make that kind of an offer to a guy who has been one of the team's very few consistent high performers for the last five years, they probably needed to just table discussions until Holmgren could hire his general manager and the club's big thinkers could come up with a better plan.

But the only person who might be handling this worse than any member of the Browns is Cribbs himself.

If he wants to threaten a holdout, fine. If he wants to threaten to demand a trade, fine. Even Hester did that prior to signing his new deal. Unfortunately, in the NFL's contract negotiating system, which is decidedly antiquated in a lot of ways, raising a fuss is the only way a player can generate any leverage.

But maybe the fuss should be saved primarily for team management. Instead, Cribbs is spewing histrionics via his Twitter account and any microphone that can pick up his voice. This past week, when he showed up at the team's Berea headquarters to clear out his locker for the season, he told the assembled media that he believe he had played his last game for the Browns. He told the media that he said his permanent good-byes to the team training and medical staff.

On Twitter, his comments have included "I don't believe I made the to do list for the team in 2010" and "I just hate being taken advantage of ... What else is new?"

There is a lot of water left to tread between where the Cribbs-Browns negotiations sit, and the irreconcilable differences that could lead to a trade. Chances are still very good that he and the Browns will be able to find a common ground and Cribbs will be in uniform, if not for organized team activities this spring, then for training camp in July. This isn't even close to over.

Which is why Cribbs declaring his relationship with the Browns over and done

with, and doing it publicly time and again, seems a little less like hardball negotiating tactics and more like a petulant grade-schooler storming up to his room and slamming the door.

Cribbs is trying to get the fans and the media opinion columnists to come down hard on the Browns under the threat of having to watch him play for another team. But facts are facts. Cribbs is under contract, he has no legal way under NFL rules to force the Browns' hand into giving him a raise or trading him, and Holmgren hasn't yet hired a GM. The GM would logically be the executive who would handle contracts and salaries, not Holmgren.

Maybe there was no good way out of this for the Browns. Maybe if they tell Cribbs to sit tight a little while longer while Holmgren hires a GM and pieces together his management team, Cribbs gets impatient and we arrive at the same Tweets and media spout-offs that have occurred this past week.

But after watching the Browns disgracefully lowball Cribbs, and then watch Cribbs throw a multimedia temper tantrum, I'm beginning to think stall tactics are the approach Holmgren should have used.

The Browns' front office, under construction yet again, is apparently in no shape to carry forth high-pressure contract negotiations at the moment. So they shouldn't have tried.

And for Cribbs, a simple "no" followed by a simple, privately-delivered "I'm not coming back here without a new deal" would have sufficed. Act like the experienced veteran you want your salary to reflect. Not like a sniveling rookie being told to run laps for the first time.