

The Neverending Story: Josh Cribbs Edition

Written by {ga=davekolonich}

Tuesday, January 12 2010 7:00 PM -

It must be the offseason - at least in Berea - since Josh Cribbs and the Browns are engaged in what has become their annual contract standoff. And while the issues are largely the same as last year, the names have changed...at least on the Browns' end. Gone is Eric Mangini as the czar-ish one-man command center of the Browns. Randy Lerner has vanished. And Mike Holmgren and Tom Heckert are now in town. So, here's the question - has anything really changed since this time last year? Or, how about last May? Dave Kolonich gives us his thoughts on the contract impasse. It must be the offseason - at least in Berea - since Josh Cribbs and the Browns are engaged in what has become their annual contract standoff. And while the issues are largely the same as last year, the names have changed...at least on the Browns' end.

Gone is Eric Mangini as the czar-ish one-man command center of the Browns, presumably with continental owner Randy Lerner, who could truly be blamed as the figure that started all of this drama over a year ago. And seriously, has anyone seen Lerner in the past month? Not that I'm overly concerned about him, but since Holmgren's arrival in town, Lerner has all but vanished.

Anyway, speaking of vanishing - unfortunately, this story will not do anything of the sort. Much like at this time last season, the value that Cribbs brings to the Browns is still difficult to put a dollar amount on. Or, at least it appears to be an almost herculean effort to put a "new" dollar amount on Cribbs' unique set of skills.

So, here's the question - has anything really changed since this time last year?

Or, how about last May?

[The Value of Cribbs](#)

There is no question that Cribbs is underpaid. However, there is also no question that Cribbs signed his last contract, which was generously structured to accomodate the potential the Browns saw in an undrafted free agent. However, the tenuous nature of an NFL player demands that money be made now. In this sense, Cribbs wants to get paid. For a special teams star with no other defined football role, the time to ask for a raise is now.

Of course, there is one small problem. Literally...

...Besides being the Czar of Berea, Eric Mangini is as much a disciple of Bill Belichick as any coach/head of player personnel in the league. Knowing this, it is

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not a stretch to suggest that Mangini will not cave into Cribbs' demands for a new deal, regardless of what was promised to him last year, or even a few months ago. Add to this the vague nature of Cribbs' role on either offense or defense and it is likely that Mangini will not make satisfying Cribbs a top priority. On paper, the Browns front office has to consider a new contract for Cribbs as essentially a new contract for a special teams player.

As for Mangini's history of refusing to cave into veteran players' contract demands, Cribbs' situation may be a little different. Trying to figure out Cribbs' worth is difficult, if not completely vague. Paying him what he's worth may prove to be more challenging. Does Cribbs deserve Devin Hester money?

Now I know what's it like to be a print reporter. Jesus, that was easy. Just substitute Mangini's name for Holmgren and you have your answer.



Although most of the wishes coming from Browns Nation would suggest otherwise, Holmgren is unlikely to begin his tenure as team president by caving into Cribbs' contract demands. Much like Mangini before him, Holmgren realizes that establishing a culture that dictates individual players assume a lower role of priority among a team is paramount.

And not to compare Cribbs to your average NFL malcontent - which he certainly is not - but the precedent set by Mangini last year dealing with Braylon and K2 and based on Holmgren's past with the likes of Joey Galloway and players not named Brett Favre leads me to believe that Cribbs is once again out of luck....at least for the time being. More on that later.

But for the sake of argument, let's take a look at whether history is indeed repeating itself. Here's more evidence from this past May...

What Cribbs Brings:

Obviously, the biggest intangible Cribbs brings to the Browns is his unique and highly effective role as a kick returner. Cribbs is a rare talent here, as he blends good straight-line speed and shifty moves with an awe-inspiring ability and passion for simply running over defenders. Without reaching to hyperbolic heights, Cribbs is certainly the best power-running kick returner in the league, and is possibly one of the best ever, in terms of physicality.

The often unnoticed skill that Cribbs brings to the team is his excellent kick coverage skills. For a former college quarterback, Cribbs is a very sound tackler, among the best on the team. The physical nature of his runbacks can also be found in his kick coverage, as Cribbs is an ideal gunner who consistently forces containment or makes tackles. This blend of size and speed again makes him very unique as a special teams defender. Cribbs' absence would be hard to replace, even on a unit that often features incredibly replaceable parts.

Everything else in Cribbs' game consists of the great unknown. Cribbs is not a great punt returner, as he doesn't seem to excel when given a smaller space to work with. Punt returning demands an almost slippery type of skill set, which Cribbs does not possess. Cribbs' best return asset is essentially his ability to get a head of steam going on a runback and then blast into his blocking wedge. On most punts, Cribbs is unable to do this, based on the nature of the play.

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As for an offensive role, it remains to be seen what Cribbs can really do. Part of this can be blamed on the often scattered Romeo Crennel/Rob Chudzinski based offenses, which stressed more downfield routes. For Cribbs, running routes from a receiver position proved to be a problem. Basically, it appears that Cribbs does not read coverages well and is not built physically or mentally to run smooth pass routes. Cribbs' body is pretty much undefined based on a particular position. His build slightly resembles a tall corner, yet he runs like a power back.

And of course, at this time most of us still thought that Cribbs could play safety. Little did we know about Mike Furrey.

Anyway, perhaps the only real change here is the addition of Cribbs' 2009 production out of the Wildcat. Give some credit to Mangini and the much beleaguered Brian Daboll for featuring Cribbs throughout the season. And while Cribbs essentially carried the offense in the team's monumental win over the Steelers, the question remains whether our future Hall of Famer's potential new contract should reflect these skills.

Because after all, outside the realm of special teams, Cribbs is still the great unknown.

Which brings us back to this...



Why the Browns Should Pay Cribbs:

Another key reason Eric Mangini should advocate a new deal for Cribbs is the immense popularity he commands in Cleveland. Not only is Cribbs a local boy, coming from Kent State, but he is the kind of self-made, selfless player that only arrives so often. Cribbs' physical play, combined with his electrifying abilities makes him vital to the team moving forward. Despite the team's brutal finish to the 2008 season, the value of Cribbs could be found in his hustling, spirited play during the hopeless month of December.

For a team desperately searching for an identity, Josh Cribbs is someone you want on your roster.

And here's the part where I make some sacrilegious statements.

There's no question that the 2009 Browns were Cribbs' team - at least based on the voices coming from the locker room and among Browns Nation. Obviously, this past season's team was the sole property of Mangini, but in terms of spirit or even as a sense of soul, Cribbs was it.

However, in 2010 - and really just in the past two weeks - the Browns' identity has shifted towards Holmgren. And before you question this, just think about it...when the Browns are now mentioned, whose name immediately follows? Or, perhaps more directly - who is now associated with the ultimate fate of the franchise?

In other words, there's only so much Cribbs can actually do.

And on a more earthly plane, there's always this to remember...

Why They Shouldn't (Pay for Cribbs):

Because of all the attributes that makes Cribbs such a dynamic player, the Browns should think long and hard before extending or signing Cribbs to a long-term deal. Even though Cribbs is relatively young, he has been playing at a high level since 2005, which is like 30 years in real time. Cribbs has been dealing punishing blows on kick coverage, but he has also received his share on returns. The question is simple: how much longer will Cribbs consistently perform?

Again, anything related to Cribbs has to eventually come down to basic numbers -

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those of the dollar kind. Or, in other words - how much of an investment should the Browns actually make in Cribbs? If we're referring to only the next 2-3 years, then a new contract for Cribbs is indeed worth the financial risk. However, much like Devin Hester and Dante Hall before him, kick returners tend to depreciate much faster than your average player.

But, since time has indeed passed, let's examine the views of all current parties involved...starting with Cribbs, who is currently making some media rounds, promoting...well, himself...



[Cribbs on ESPN](#)

Darnell Dinkins (Bounce City)

Hey is it true that you're so fast when you turn out the lights to go to bed at night

you're in bed before it gets dark??

This part's irrelevant towards the larger conversation...but still, it's Darnell Dinkins - one of my favorite former Browns special teamers. And the guy who got locked in the Dairy Queen freezer on *Josh's Cribs*. Epic.

Tony (Akron, OH)

If the Browns refuse to offer you a a new contract and also refuse to trade you, wouldn't you be forfeiting your salary by sitting out? Is that something you are seriously considering?

Josh Cribbs

(1:28 PM)

I don't believe it will ever come to that. For the Browns, it's just business and that wouldn't be smart on their behalf.

Sean (Columbus)

I am behind you but your timing is terrible. Why aren't you waiting until new President Mike Holmgren gets settled in and the rest of the front office settled?

Josh Cribbs

(1:30 PM)

They offered me a contract, take it or leave it. After Holmgren had already gotten in. So, they told me to take it or leave it. They gave me the offer first. I respectfully declined their offer.

Here's the thing about Cribbs - he's too honest and too decent of a human being for his own good. Understandably, he's upset that he has far outperformed his contract. I doubt that anyone would dispute this. However, Cribbs needs to be careful in making his argument public. Although he rightfully deserves more, taking on his new boss in such a public forum can't be the best business strategy to employ.

Also, speaking of business - which Cribbs does - he has to also realize that he truly lacks any real leverage in the situation. Basically, the Browns will ultimately win any real standoff with Cribbs. Either the Browns pay him, or they don't. Ever hear of this league called the NFL?

As for Cribbs' comments here, another thing to consider is the idea that business

and smarts don't always go together - much like having multiple outspoken agents who are not on the same page.

Speaking of which...maybe this is Cribbs' biggest problem....

[Rickert Expresses Optimism at Heckert's Arrival](#)

Now that Tom Heckert has become the G.M. of the Cleveland Browns, agent J.R. Rickert is optimistic that the team finally will "pay the man" named Josh Cribbs.

"Now that Mike Holmgren and Tom Heckert are running things," Rickert said via Twitter today, "this will get worked out!"

...And it appears that the folks who control the flow of the dollars don't share the opinion of Cribbs that Hall of Famer Jim Brown, a member of the franchise's senior management team, expressed last month: "He is a spiritual force. What he does is so pure, it's running the ball, then going down to make a tackle. It's playing the game with the right attitude, giving himself all the way."

The more I hear from and about Rickert, the more I realize that Cribbs needs to find himself some new representation. If you take Rickert's words - or tweets - at face value, he's basically suggesting that Tom Heckert will give his client what he so desperately wants.

This would suggest a few things...

1. Heckert has ultimate authority in Cleveland - which he clearly does not.
2. Heckert will undermine his new boss to take care of a popular player.
3. Holmgren will be reduced to a mere pedestrian in this situation.

Not exactly a sound strategy for Cribbs here. Or Heckert. If Rickert's plan is to focus solely on Heckert to get his client a new deal, then my suspicions that he is nothing more than an amateur will be proven correct. Considering that Holmgren holds the key to Cribbs's ultimate fortunes, it is probably a good idea to not undermine the new franchise czar.



And of course, the part about Jim Brown affirms something completely different...that is - Cribbs is so Yoda.

And finally, let's hear from a more reasoned voice - or at least the one that counts in this situation...

[Schudel on Holmgren](#)

If the door was ever really locked and bolted on the Browns side in the contract dispute with Josh Cribbs, Browns president Mike Holmgren opened it Monday night.

The agents for Cribbs last week lashed out at the Browns, saying the \$1.4 million a year offer to Cribbs was "insulting." J.R. Rickert, one of Cribbs' agents, said he went public with their frustrations because the Browns told him they would not budge from their offer, which runs through 2015. Rickert said the Browns told him, "Take it or leave it."

Not so, Holmgren said in a conference call.

"That take it or leave it stuff, I think that went out a long time ago," Holmgren said. "I'm not sure you ever say that. The one thing that I think you have to try and avoid is negotiating against yourself. Any sort of negotiation is, in my opinion, a two-way street. My hope is that we can get this to a win-win situation. Yes, I think there's a chance. There's light at the end of the tunnel, hopefully."

"We're looking at ways now maybe to change what's going on with Josh and the offer and we'll see. We're getting new people in here and trying to get people in place. I'm new. I'm still hopeful that (to) everyone's satisfaction we can work this out."

Holmgren reiterated how unusual it is to redo a contract with three years left on it. In 2006 Cribbs signed a six-year extension through 2012 for \$6.77 million.

The tone that Holmgren strikes is indeed positive and could even be construed as cooperative. And sounding like the even-tempered realist that this franchise has desperately needed for some time, Holmgren makes an important point by referencing "time." With all the change currently unfolding in Berea, it's

clear that Cribbs' contract is not the main priority....at least not in mid-January.

Perhaps this bit of common sense could come in handy for Cribbs' agents - and Cribbs himself, who are clearly rushing things. At least give Holmgren some time to take his shoes off before making demands. Because clearly the decision comes down to Holmgren.

And in terms of timing, it's also worth noting that we have no idea how this franchise under Holmgren will approach free agency during this and next year. With the potential for an uncapped 2010 and a football-free 2011, fiscal conservatism could likely rule in Berea and among several other football cities throughout the country.

Which brings us full circle...again...meaning that it's all about the money.

The Pick

Much like the decision to retain Mangini, let's hope Holmgren is examining all possible options regarding Cribbs. Because this issue is so much more complex than simply "pay the man" - albeit the most explosive and beloved "man" that Cleveland has had since Bernie Kosar - I feel that everyone should just calm down for the moment.

Let's give Holmgren some time to figure out the overall direction of this franchise, before we analyze to death the future of one individual player.

And of course, having said that - the more things change...