

Checks & Balances

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Friday, January 15 2010 7:00 PM -

Mike Holmgren's decision to retain Eric Mangini seems to have surprised just about everyone in the Cleveland Browns fraternity to some degree. Nick Allburn admits to being in the "fire Mangini" camp leading into Holmgren's decision last week. While Nick believed (and still believes) that Mangini is a competent coach, he thought it would be too difficult for him to coexist with Mike Holmgren over the long haul. But Holmgren saw things differently. After several lengthy meetings discussing philosophy and teamwork, Holmgren elected to keep Mangini. Apparently coaching schemes aren't as important to Holmgren as some of us believed, and he's more concerned with adding good people around him, regardless of X's and O's.



Mike Holmgren's decision to retain Eric Mangini seems to have surprised just about everyone in the Cleveland Browns fraternity to some degree. We've certainly seen NFL coaches get sacked who had accomplished more than Mangini and who weren't lightning rods for controversy.

One of the most interesting things about Mangini is how the opinions of fans and media members see-sawed on him throughout the season. When the Browns sat at 1-11, you couldn't pay a Browns fan to back the beleaguered coach. Winning tends to cure most ills, and when Mangini's Browns reeled off four straight wins to close out the season, the landscape definitely changed.

When Mike Holmgren held his first press conference a few days before he announced the Mangini verdict, fan opinion seemed nearly split on whether Mangini should stay or go. At least in the last decade, we haven't seen the

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Cleveland fan base so polarized by one of the three teams' coaches. But what might be most interesting is not that Mangini is polarizing, but that the majority of his supporters and detractors tend to be fairly moderate. As opposed to say, Romeo Crennel, who had little or not support before he was fired, most folks who had their fingers on the pulse of the Cleveland Browns seemed to recognize Mangini's clear strengths and weaknesses, and simply believed that the bad outweighs the good, or vice-versa.

As for me, I was in the "fire Mangini" camp. While I believed (and still believe) that Mangini was a competent coach, I thought it would be too difficult for him to coexist with Mike Holmgren over the long haul. The two come from drastically different coaching backgrounds and as such, they have developed very different philosophies. Add in some of Mangini's questionable interactions with colleagues and the fact that Holmgren's arrival stripped him of total authority, and it seemed like the two would be on a collision course down the road. From Holmgren's perspective, it looked much safer to start from scratch.

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As I've mentioned before, I think Eric Mangini is a good coach. He's not Paul Brown, but he's a solid coach who got a raw deal last season in New York. (After more than a decade of Palmer/Davis/Crennel, "solid" would be a major upgrade.)

Mangini's Jets went 9-7 last season just like Rex Ryan's club this season, and they did so with inferior personnel and without the luxury of being gifted two wins to end the season. But a down year in the AFC allowed Ryan's Jets to sneak into the playoffs. Combine that with Rex Ryan's goofy "walking sound byte" demeanor, which runs in stark contrast to Mangini's reserved personality, and Rex Ryan has become a media darling while Mangini has been (sometimes fairly, and sometimes unfairly) vilified.

But back to Holmgren, there certainly were some external factors that played into his decision to keep Mangini. The lack of available alternatives, such as former Holmgren assistant Jon Gruden, was probably a factor. And even though Randy

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Lerner is playing with Monopoly money, I'm sure he wasn't wild about the possibility of paying three head coaches (Romeo Crennel's contract runs through 2011) for the next two seasons, especially with the specter of a lockout looming in 2011.

We've seen new management teams come in and tear organizations down to the bare bones. With Holmgren, who has stated that what made the Cleveland job so appealing was the total control he was granted and the fact that "no layers" existed between himself and Randy Lerner, it looked like a slam dunk that he would push the self-destruct button and build every facet of the organization in his image. But one enormous thing that retaining Eric Mangini indicates is that Holmgren is not only comfortable working with people who aren't necessarily "his guys," but he welcomes it.

One of the most difficult things to do in any sort of leadership position is to seek out dissenting opinions. We all like to believe that our way is the right way, and nobody relishes being told otherwise. But if you don't actively seek out different perspectives, you risk boxing yourself in creatively, and groupthink becomes a very real danger. With that in mind, it's encouraging that Mike Holmgren's first real decision as team president, retaining Mangini, will bring a very different voice and perspective to all major team decisions. Holmgren might not always take Mangini's advice, but it's important that debate will take place, and all of Holmgren's decisions won't simply be rubber stamped.

Let's shift the focus to Mangini, who certainly had his shortcomings in his first year with the Browns. In a process that made less sense than the last *Matrix* sequel, Eric Mangini essentially hired his own boss, former Browns general manager George Kokinis. It was clear from the beginning that Mangini had the power both on the field and in the front office. As a result, Mangini bears responsibility for some -- if not all -- of the personnel moves the Browns made in 2009.

Mangini's personnel record was truly a debacle. He received acceptable, but hardly great value for Kellen Winslow, he definitely sold low on Braylon Edwards, and his apparent aversion to star players was very unsettling. To run a winning football team, sometimes you have to tolerate a handful of eccentric personalities in order to build the most talented roster possible, and Mangini didn't seem to understand that.

Mangini had four draft picks in the first two rounds last year, and two of them

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(Robiskie, Veikune) didn't even dress for most games. Ray Charles was better at darts than Mangini was at drafting. The only saving grace of Mangini's draft was Alex Mack, who developed into a solid center by the end of the season.

Enter Mike Holmgren, who also didn't have a stellar draft record when he served as coach/GM of the Seahawks. In a strange twist of fate, the Browns hired a president who probably is sympathetic to the difficulty Eric Mangini faced in both constructing and coaching the Browns last season. Holmgren, who is a surefire Hall of Fame coach, probably understands better than anybody that even great coaches can't handle the enormous responsibility that comes with that dual role (with the one exception currently residing in the Boston area). With that in mind, Holmgren's experience almost certainly worked in Mangini's favor.

Once Mangini made it clear to Holmgren that he was comfortable staying in Cleveland even without control of personnel, Holmgren probably became pretty comfortable with Mangini. Holmgren knew that he's not a total authority on personnel either, especially on the defensive side of the ball, so he hired new general manager Tom Heckert to fill that role.

By adding Heckert to build the team, Holmgren has neutralized Eric Mangini's biggest weakness. Not only that, but by stripping Mangini of his personnel responsibilities Holmgren gave Mangini more time to focus on coaching the team, which puts him in a position to improve what was already his strength.

Since October, I've wanted to see Eric Mangini canned. I thought his weaknesses outweighed his strengths. But this new management structure will create clearly defined roles, and Eric Mangini's role will be that of the coach, not the general manager. There's a new sheriff in town, and it's the walrus, not the penguin. Mike Holmgren has made it clear that any kind of power play from Mangini will not be tolerated, and you can't sweet talk Holmgren like you can a certain phantom owner. If Mangini doesn't toe the line and stick to his specialty then he'll be terminated, and he's aware of that.

I'm still not sold on Mangini but I'm glad he's still the Browns' coach, which wasn't the case two weeks ago. While Mangini certainly has his faults, the checks and balances of this new managerial hierarchy should help him focus on what he does best: coaching (and *only* coaching).

It remains to be seen whether or not this new management team can help the

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Browns ascend out of the AFC North cellar, but the Browns' decision-makers are now credible football guys with proven track records, which is definitely a first for the post-1999 Browns. It has been 11 long, agonizing years, but the Browns might finally be back on track.