

What if Art Modell Still Owned the Browns?

Written by {ga=davekolonich}

Thursday, February 11 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, February 17 2010 9:09 PM

There is a moment in the infant stages of every NFL offseason where the Browns' crushing record of recent futility, eternal swirling void of leadership and general decade-long regression matter very little.

Entering the NFL offseason, I'm always reminded of how worse things could be. Sure, we're about to enter a grand experiment of mashing styles, considering the backgrounds of our President and Coach, and in a league that rewards stellar quarterback play, our most successful offensive strategy involves running the ball 40 times a game.

Yet, the pending allure of free agency and a promising draft await - as they do every March and April. Along with the practical salvation of league parity, and the eternal hope that fills some 70,000 Stadium seats on Sundays, hope still reigns eternal among Browns Nation...mainly because it just does.

In my view, merely being able to show hope for our Browns is a thing to be cherished.

Consider the darkest time in the franchise's history - some 15 years to the date - when the NFL officially gave the blessing for the Browns to become the Ravens. In the weeks and months that followed, an oddly surreal feeling of emptiness began to creep in among Browns Nation, revealing itself at the most unique moments.

For me, the 1996 draft was such a moment.

In my youth - and still to this day - I lived for the draft. It was such a rare phenomena to basically discover new players and instantly attach them to the Browns' future success. In the most idealistic of all NFL holidays, even the likes of Mike Junkin and Tommy Vardell were somehow exaggerated to the point of All-Pros.

And why not?

Yet the first draft of my lifetime that didn't involve the Browns was perhaps the cruelest day in the history of the league. Even worse than watching the old Stadium being cruelly ripped apart by a broken-hearted fan base was the final realization that it was indeed over. The Browns were officially "off the clock" in a most permanent and ultimately, fatal manner.



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To add to our greatest insult as a fanbase was the realization that our corpse franchise was still operating, far beyond our reach. In fact, the 1996 draft - as meaningless as it was for Browns Nation - laid the foundation for the Baltimore Ravens' eventual Super Bowl winning team. Despite the cold detachment of losing our team, the threads of identity still existed as the likes of Jonathan Ogden and Ray Lewis became the "new Browns" future cornerstones.

And the rest of course is mere history. However, history being what it is, I've always wondered what would have become had the Browns stayed put in Cleveland under the continued ownership of Art Modell.

As we struggled through a football-less abyss for the next three years, then have stumbled through the last ten under a variety of false starts, poor management and endless reboots, the question is a most intriguing one...

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To examine such a scenario, you have to ignore some basic realities.

First, let's ignore the fact that Art Modell had been running the Browns' franchise in the red for [some two decades](#).

Or, that

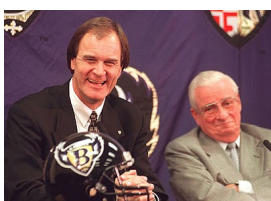
[the Cleveland media was preoccupied](#)

with the rise of the Indians occurring at the time.

Second, this hypothetical scenario would also have to assume that somehow an always financially-strapped City of Cleveland would have fed Modell some stadium concessions, complete with the sweetheart incentives given to both the Cavs and Indians. After all, Modell always cited - rather correctly - that owning the Browns was a financial nightmare for he and his family.

Third, we again have to take another leap - this time, we need to assume that Modell the businessman would have been financially saved by such an offer. Of course, reality is completely suspended here, as this would mean that the city could support three brand new arenas/stadiums, along with keeping the respective owners of all three sports franchises happily coiffured.

Finally, in order to make this fiction work - let's keep all the Ravens' front office, coaching staff and players in place - only transporting them to Cleveland. So, in this scenario, Ozzie Newsome still gets his first front-office assignment, which would assume that most of the core of Baltimore's Super Bowl winning team is still intact.



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So what would happen?

First, let's take a look at the potential altering of history involving Bill Belichick. Coming off the fifth and final year of his contract, Belichick was let go before Modell moved the team to Baltimore. Although history tends to suggest otherwise, Belichick did have some success in building the Browns into playoff contenders in 1994. Naturally, no one in Cleveland had much of a chance during the traumatic 1995 season.

I've always thought that Modell simply found a perfect segueway for jettisoning Belichick during the move to Baltimore. Had the franchise still been in Cleveland, and assuming that the drama of 1995 produced a more stable working environment, it is more than possible that the Browns may have produced a winner. As for the status of Ted Marchibroda, Modell's first Baltimore coaching hire, his presence was more reflective of a community outreach towards a new fanbase, rather than purely a coaching decision.

So, if Belichick stays in Cleveland, then what becomes of Ozzie Newsome? If you track Belichick's career, you'll notice that because he was given a rare opportunity in his first NFL assignment - by Marchibroda, nonetheless - it's more than probable that he would have given his blessing to Modell regarding the ascension of Newsome in the front office.

Having Newsome on board would have signalled a similar direction in the team's mid to late 90's drafts, which would mean Ogden, Lewis, Peter Boulware and a littany of offensive skill player misses would have been destined for the lakefront. And it's not much of a stretch to suggest that the likes of Vinny Testaverde would have hung around for another few seasons, along with the addition of Marvin Lewis as the team's defensive coordinator.

Of course, fate being what it is - it's not improbable to think that Brian Billick could have eventually come to Cleveland, bringing along with him a series of journeymen quarterbacks and unbridled ego. And while everything I've put forth here seems to be more reflective of ideals than realism, let's examine another scenario.

For the sake of argument, let's say that Modell somehow was enticed into staying in Cleveland - without the lure of a new stadium. Improbable as it sounds, especially considering Modell's red-ink finances, let's pretend that the old Stadium was refurbished along the lines of Green Bay's Lambeau Field, or simply left intact such as the ones in Oakland or San Francisco.

Even if the Browns would have been destined for their own Super Bowl win - the one that was rightfully ours in the first place - what would remain today?

First, [sites like this](#) would have an altogether different meaning.

Second, had the Browns under continued Modell ownership survived into the new NFL millennium, we would have avoided having to [read things like this](#), which means that it's possible that some 15 years of Ozzie Newsome-led management could have produced the kind of stability that is currently nowhere to be found in Cleveland.

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However, if you consider Modell's poor financial record as a modern day owner, our current Browns could be facing an oblivion far worse than the one encountered in 1995.

Or, in other words - I don't say many positive things about Randy Lerner, but give him this - at least he's not broke.



Could you imagine a Modell-owned team facing the economic straits of the past few years? Without a new stadium and clinging to archaic ownership philosophies, and lacking a competent legacy, Browns Nation would be facing a fate similar to the one currently being experienced by loyal Buffalo Bills fans.

Although we've mostly had it bad over the past decade, things could be far worse.

Consider the case of Ralph Wilson in Buffalo. Buffalo, much like Cleveland, is suffering in a post-industrial America, one in which former Rust Belt regions are being pummeled in an age of globalization. Wilson's Bills are still operating in a generations old stadium, one that experiences power grid failures, in a market that is incredibly unattractive to younger and more mobile talent.

The Bills' methods of franchise management appear to be decades behind those of other NFL teams, as evidenced by the team's recent hirings of more inexpensive coaching retreats. Free agency acquisitions are mostly barren territory for the Bills, save for the occasional image reclamation projects and players simply out of options.

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After all, an opportunity to play in Buffalo is basically considered the Siberia of the league - which is a shame, considering the amazing core of Bills fans that continually support the team. In the end, Buffalo only has its great fans, a shared sense of history and the inevitable knowledge that once its octogenerian owner passes, their team will likely move to a more promising locale.

Which would be the exact fate awaiting our franchise right now, at least if fate had not intervened.

So, as the quarterback debate here fumbles along, and the occasional Donovan McNabb rumor is floated in the lead-up to the most wonderful day of the year, let's always keep something in perspective. Despite our continued ownership and front office stumbles, and because of our disasterous performance over the past decade, along with the continued anguish that hopefully one day makes all of our suffering worth it, just remember one thing...

It could be a lot worse.