

Finding a Pulse

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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When it comes to the Cleveland Browns, about the only question on anyone's mind is “who should they draft?” After pouring through all the various mock drafts and writings and ramblings of blowhards like Mel Kiper, Jr., I've come to one conclusion: anyone with a pulse would be a good start.

Browns' president Mike Holmgren, in his final pre-draft press conference last week didn't say much, but then again he is guarding nuclear launch codes. But yet he said just enough to make me realize that a little bit of candor sneaked into the organization when no one was looking.

Responding to a question of whether or not the Browns intend to focus more on defense than offense in the draft, Holmgren said “I think we were 31st on defense last year and I think we were 31st on offense. It's like, I have two thumbs and there are five holes in the dike. How are we going to do this? That's where you get into the discussion about not reaching for immediate help. Let's get the best player. We know we are going to get a player that will help us be a better football team. Is there an area that needs more help or sooner help than others? Probably. As the board sets up now for us we have a chance to get a really fine football player on either side of the football.”

In other words, anyone with a pulse would be a good start.

What's a little disheartening about Holmgren's statement, though, is that some form of it has basically been true for this franchise since it returned to the NFL. Every year it's pretty much the same story: with needs this vast, almost any player should get you there.

And yet, that hasn't been true with this team thanks to a 10-year history too often dotted with players like Courtney Brown, Gerard Warren, William Green, Braylon Edwards and Kamerion Wimbley in the first rounds and Dennis Northcutt, Kevin Johnson, Chaun Thompson and Quincy

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Morgan in the second rounds. To paraphrase Holmgren's words, this is a team with five holes in the dike and no fingers on its hands.

But enough about that. This is a whole new ball game, a whole new regime from completely different cities and a history of success. Thus this really is the year in which to best test the theory about whether or not the Browns have become the black hole of the NFL.

But irrespective of which way Holmgren and general manager Tom Heckert go with this draft, one thing is for certain, there will be raging disagreement among the fans no matter who's selected. Mainly that's because the fans, like the general managers doing the picking, aren't really in any position to judge how college performance might translate into the pros.

There are just too many variables. You can draw some conclusions, for example, about a player like Sam Bradford or Jimmy Clausen but the one thing you won't be able to tell is what he's going to be like perched behind center on a Sunday afternoon with his team 6 points down with 3 minutes left to play.

Going into the 2000 draft, no one projected that Tom Brady, for example, would be one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time. You can give some credit to Bill Belichick for discovering Brady's hidden talent after being around him for a few seasons, but to say even Belichick understood what he had when he drafted him would be wildly inaccurate. If he did, he wouldn't have waited until the 6th round and used the second of his two 6th round picks at that to grab him.

Localized, look at a player like Josh Cribbs. He played for one of the consistently worst programs in the country, Kent State, and in a conference, the MAC, that produces some decent NFL talent but not otherwise highly competitive teams.

You can give former Browns' general manager Phil Savage some credit for at least giving Cribbs the opportunity when he signed him as an undrafted free agent, but so much of that signing smacked of a kind gesture to a local program. It turned out, of course, that Cribbs is in the conversation for best kick returners of all time. In fact, he's in the conversation for best special teams player of all time, so valuable is he to this team that the Browns likely didn't even consider for a moment grabbing Ted Ginn, Jr. when the Miami Dolphins dumped him a few days

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ago for a measly 5th round pick.

These two and plenty of others have a certain "it" factor that simply can't be measured at the NFL combine or the vaunted private workouts that teams conduct. When coupled with supposedly can't miss players like Gerard Warren or Tim Couch, you start to understand why NFL types are so reluctant to talk about their draft plans: it limits the criticism until after the decision already is made.

Part of the problem in trying to judge college talent has to do with the fact that the consistency of competition at the college level is lacking. Even in glamor conferences like the Big Ten, the SEC and the PAC-10, the competition is uneven, at best. Consequently general managers are constantly trying to draw multi-million dollar conclusions on the basis of a handful of games each year.

Once players get to the NFL, of course, it's far easier to figure things out. The difference between, say, the New Orleans Saints, at the moment, and a bottom feeder teams like Cleveland is far more narrow than the difference between Ohio State and Indiana, year in and year out. That's why a team like Miami bites the bullet on Ginn and gives him away. A different regime drafted him anyway and with the benefit of a little perspective the new group has decided that Ginn perhaps should never have converted from defensive back in college.

Meanwhile, in Cleveland, the Browns similarly dump Brady Quinn on the Denver Broncos. They got more for Quinn than the Dolphins got for Ginn, at least on paper. Whether it works out that way remains to be seen. Far more interesting, though, is the similar arcs to their careers.

Quinn probably doesn't end up in Cleveland if the Dolphins didn't surprise everyone by drafting Ginn instead of Quinn. It's still not clear why the Dolphins went after Ginn with a roster that featured quarterbacks Joey Harrington (another high profile bust) and Cleo Lemon on the roster. But when that happened, Quinn went on that infamous free-fall until saved by Savage and the Browns.

Yet consider what would have happened had Quinn been taken by the Dolphins. Whether he would have been successful is the great unknown but he certainly would have had far more opportunities to establish himself than he had in Cleveland. Ginn, meanwhile, would have

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probably slid into the second round somewhere else and perhaps been more successful with less burdensome expectations.

But given the vagaries of the NFL, both Quinn and Ginn now find themselves saddled with the same sort of "bust"-like baggage. And whether or not that moniker on either player is far from certain. The only thing certain, of course, is that to this point neither lived up to their draft status but given the situations each entered, that isn't a surprise.

All this points to exactly why it isn't worth spending a whole lot of time as a fan wringing your hands over whether or not the Browns go after Eric Berry or trade up or trade down. It's not that it doesn't matter it's more that you just never know whether it matters. Too much happens from the draft onward to let conclusions be definitively drawn.

I still wonder, for example, exactly what head coach Eric Mangini was thinking when he took both Brian Robiskie and Mohamed Massaquoi in the second round last year. I still wonder what Mangini was thinking when he buried Robiskie for most of the season as well. What I don't wonder about anymore is whether or not last season was a waste of a season for both. It was.

While Massaquoi played far more than Robiskie, the way Mangini handled the offensive side of the ball made it difficult for either player to succeed. First he dithered with the quarterback situation until he was absolutely certain that neither Quinn nor Anderson had any comfort behind center. Then he went into a Woody Hayes-like offense late in the season. All together, it wasn't just a wasted season for Massaquoi and Robiskie, but for any player that held the position of receiver, and this was on a team with almost no credible receivers on the roster going into the season.

Under a different head coach, either or both of Massaquoi and Robiskie might be much further along in their development and entering their second season with far less question marks. Instead, they are teetering as potential busts.

But this scenario, frankly, plays itself out all over the NFL. Teams make strange draft decisions and then do a lousy job on executing whatever strategy it was that drove them to make those draft decisions in the first place.

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It's intriguing to think that this new regime has it all figured out and the old ways of doing business are now behind this franchise. But the draft isn't really much of a panacea particularly if the follow up is so poor. That's why it's not so much who the Browns draft but how they go about using the players they get. In other words, it really is true, anybody with a pulse is a good start.