

A Fundamental Question

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The spotlight has returned to the Cleveland Browns, almost by default, and with it comes the various emotions that accompany any new season. This season has a different feel for internal and external reasons. But beyond the metaphysics and existentialism of it all is a much more fundamental question, can Eric Mangini coach?

So much about Mangini is focused on how he might get along under a new regime that places him about third in the pecking order after a year at the top. But perhaps of greater importance is the simple issue of whether or not Mangini can actually be a good head coach.

Depending on how optimistically you view the Browns' chances this season there probably are more important questions that need answering. Eventually, though, this will become a more pressing concern. The talent on this year's team appears better than last year's. Next year should be even better and so on until the point where the real difference between success and failure will be the head coach.

If Mangini can coach, then the Browns are probably set from a management perspective for the next several years. If Mangini can't coach, then the team is in for still another reboot, another program and, God help us, another process.

Right now, getting an answer to the question about Mangini's abilities as a head coach is as elusive as a straight answer from him about what time the next practice starts. His record doesn't provide nearly the clues you might think.

He was an assistant coach in the NFL for 10 years, which is plenty of time to prepare, but he served only one year as a coordinator, the usual step before becoming a head coach. Until the

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Jets hired him four years ago to be their head coach, his overall experience was limited to the teachings of Bill Belichick and/or Bill Parcells. Both of them have proven themselves as head coaches in the NFL but it's still a rather limited view. Surely Mangini could have benefited from a broader perspective.

The one thing you hear over and over again about Mangini is that he brings a unique passion to his work. That's evident from his Horatio Alger ascent from a mere ball boy and public relations intern to eventually NFL head coach.

Mangini also appears to be well versed in the technical aspects of the game. You rarely hear anyone question Mangini's football acumen, for instance.

But none of this does much to answer the ultimate question about whether or not he can translate that passion and knowledge to become a successful head football coach at this level.

If fans are confused, they aren't the only ones. When new club president Mike Holmgren took over, he didn't exactly give Mangini a huge public vote of confidence. Instead, he took his time to announce that Mangini would be staying on. Understandable, perhaps, but also insightful.

The fact that Mangini's status even lingered for more than a few moments after Holmgren was hired tells you that even Holmgren doesn't yet know what he has in Mangini. Last season was a mixed bag of drama and insurrection, much of which was of Mangini's own making. The team ended with 4 straight wins against other teams playing out the string, but that ended up amounting to adding whipped cream to a pile of cow dung.

But Holmgren is hardly the first person to wonder whether Mangini can ever be the right fit as a head coach. The thinness of this resume was certainly raised by those who questioned the Jets' hiring of Mangini late in 2005. But that was mostly dismissed because of his prior associations with both Belichick and Parcells. It was a great theory.

According to ESPN, Woody Johnson, the Jets owner, emphasized Mangini's pedigree first and his passion second as the main reasons for his hiring. In context, that's not a surprise. There

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wasn't much else to point to.

It seemed to help Mangini's candidacy with the Jets that he was close to Mike Tannebaum, who was serving as the Jets' assistant general manager at the time. Yet just three seasons later, when Tannebaum was fully in charge of the franchise, he fired Mangini.

You could make the case that Mangini's termination in New York seemed to be a knee jerk reaction to a late season collapse that took the team from an 8-3 record to a 9-7 finish and out of the playoffs. But on the other hand, when stacked with the previous season's 4-12 disaster, it became clear at least to Tannebaum that the Jets were neither progressing under Mangini nor headed in the right direction. It's hard to argue otherwise.

The other disturbing aspect with Mangini is his polarizing personality. You could legitimately argue that saddled with being the youngest head coach in the NFL while he was with New York, Mangini overcompensated by becoming Belichick-light but without the resume. And yet in his first season with Cleveland, Mangini didn't seem to have learned all that much. He still clashed with too many veterans and otherwise ran an organization that was far more dysfunctional than efficient.

But it goes just beyond his tendencies toward "little man's syndrome." He also has a knack of permanently alienating those that helped him get to where he's at.

First there was Belichick, the person Mangini called his mentor, his teacher and "a close friend that I will have the rest of my life," at the time of his Jets' hiring, according to ESPN.

That dissolved within the next two years after Mangini blew the whistle on him about allegedly spying on the opposition.

Next came Tannebaum, the person who helped get Mangini the job in New York only to fire him. The "spygate" episode certainly made Belichick look bad but it didn't do much for Mangini, either, inside or outside the Jets complex. Mangini looked small for throwing Belichick to the wolves and many felt he violated certain unwritten rules about dealing with your colleagues. For

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Tannenbaum, league relationships are critical to his job and Mangini's behavior, which amounted to whining, was a problem he didn't need.

Then came George Kokinis. Mangini, given the rather odd power to hire his own boss, he hired a close friend in Kokinis. When Kokinis wanted to be more than the figurehead that Mangini envisioned, the two clashed and Kokinis was out. Another friendship destroyed.

What this says, if anything, about Mangini's abilities as a head coach depends on how important you think any of these events really are to a person's ability to lead. Certainly Mangini has his share of positive relationships that he maintains so it's not as if he's an island. But yet his tendency to cast aside those who helped him along the way is disturbing.

At 39 years of age, Mangini certainly has enough experience as a NFL head coach to start producing some real, tangible results. This may not be a critical year for him but it's important nonetheless. For him to succeed, he's going to have to show the kind of tangible progress he couldn't demonstrate in New York. He'll have to prove that he can take a bunch of players on a path going nowhere to a team that's on the path to somewhere. Mangini doesn't lack for confidence even though there's nothing in his track record yet that actually suggests that this kind of success is inevitable.