

Growth Spurt

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Saturday night's Cleveland Browns preseason game against the St. Louis Rams was the kind of mistake-filled mish-mash that Browns fans have seen too many times over the years. And yet, why is it that I feel better about this Browns team than I have about any Browns team in several years?

For starters, maybe it's because this is no longer the Romeo Crennel era when mistakes like those seen on Saturday night, fumbles, penalties, bad routes, were essentially just part of an incoherent mix. In other words, the mess of Saturday night is far more likely to be an anomaly than a trend.

Beyond that, though, I think the best reason to feel better about this team than almost any other version of the Browns in the last 10 years is because there is a positive direction taking hold over this team and the positive changes in head coach Eric Mangini is a big reason why.

It would be silly not to acknowledge the real strides Mangini has made in just 12 months as the Browns' head coach. His personal growth and this team's progress aren't coincidences. The two are inextricably linked.

For all the preaching that Mangini does to his players about existing within the team dynamic,

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he seemed slow to embrace that ethic himself. But that's clearly changed. Maybe it was the forced shotgun marriage that he never expected or the organic process of maturity. It's probably a little of both. But it is working and that's a very positive sign for this franchise.

The back story on how club president Mike Holmgren got to Cleveland is well known by this point. It was a move that everyone else saw coming even if Mangini didn't. Nonetheless, where Holmgren's arrival could have and probably should have brought about the installation of an entirely new management team, Holmgren instead decided to stay the course.

His hope, really, was that Mangini could find a way to work within a system that wasn't of his own choosing. After all, as refreshing as starting over sounds, in the short term it's a major set back. Holmgren decided instead to keep Mangini and see how he would react. Hope isn't the best strategy but in this case it appears to be paying off.

With the Browns' preseason at the halfway point and training camp officially closed as preparations for the new season really begin in earnest, the lack of controversy surrounding this team has been the most remarkable turnaround. Last season played out like a Roseanne Roseannadanna monologue, it was always something.

This season is a veritable sea of tranquility. Holmgren's presence helps, certainly, but he's been mostly in the background. The day-to-day burden of maintaining control resides with Mangini and the contrast between this season and last is as dramatic as the contrast between Jake Delhomme and Derek Anderson.

The first thing you notice is that the perpetual cloud of dread hanging over this team has dissipated. That doesn't mean there are endless sunny skies, but it does mean that each day seems brighter than the day before. Mangini seems far more relaxed even as he maintains his intensity. There doesn't appear to be any of the carping and sniping that hung around the edge of Berea like a vulture waiting to pounce at the first opportunity.

Mangini is crisper about his thoughts in interviews and far more revealing as well. That wouldn't be hard, of course, because he treated every question last season as a sort of game in which the object was to find new ways to act pained while saying absolutely nothing.

In his postgame interviews since the Rams game, Mangini spoke easily about exactly what was on his mind without interfusing much coachspeak in the process. Consider, for example, his remarks about his team's inability to cope with the elements Saturday night, as reported in Mary Kay Cabot's column in the Plain Dealer on Monday.

"For the time being, we could rent out the indoor facility for a car show, because we are not going in there any time soon. We need to be able to play in the weather...We are going to have snow, we are going to have wind, we are going to have all those things, and it affects the game. It affects the footing, it affects the ball handling, it affects the path of the ball and those are things that we need to be able to play through and be successful at playing through."

Obvious? Yes, but last season Mangini would likely have channeled Bill Belichick and said something on the order of "you saw it like I did. We just have to get better at these things and we're going to continue to work at it until we do." Now, Mangini identifies the problem and publicly outlines the plan of attack. It's enough to make your head spin, actually.

Fans not only look to connect with the players, they want to connect with the coaches as well. Last season a connection was formed with defensive coordinator Rob Ryan. To fans his lack of filter was refreshing. It didn't matter if you asked him about poor tackling or the season finale of American Idol. He was almost honest to a fault about how he felt and threw in a few f-bombs as casually as a Dawg Pound veteran does when ordering his 10th and 11th beers.

Mangini on the other hand spent too much time trying to be the anti-Ryan. His weekly press conferences were mostly perfunctory and the only time he really sat down to show a different side was when his job was in trouble late in the season and then with the national media and not the local reporters.

Maybe Mangini took note of how Ryan handled matters and saw that a little candor goes a long way. Mangini seems far more comfortable with the local press this year and it is showing in his willingness to talk plainly about both the team's successes and its shortcomings.

As an assistant coach, Ryan will always be a fan favorite just like the second string quarterback.

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He can get away with a lot as a result. For the head coach, there are other issues, mostly political, to balance. Being well-liked by the fans is more of a perk than a prerequisite. Still this is football and it's supposed to be fun and it finally looks like Mangini is finding a way to balance it all and have some fun in the process. If nothing else, he's cracked more smiles this preseason than in all of last season.

Maybe it's all just the natural process of maturing and growing into the role he coveted since his days as a ball boy in Berea, that is the basis for the real change in Mangini. When he became the Jets head coach at age 35, it was pretty heady stuff. Some early success got him a clever nickname, Manguinius, and a cameo role on The Sopranos.

But like an athlete who has been given too much too soon, think LeBron James here or Tiger Woods, it seemed like Mangini began to be impressed by his own press clippings. Suddenly the potential others saw in him was replaced by a coach who acted like he woke up on third base and assumed he hit a triple.

You can argue forcefully that it took Mangini too long to grow into his role and that a little more humility and a little less hubris along the way would have gained him more fans. But if all of that baggage is truly behind him then none of that will matter much going forward.

What Browns fans are seeing now is a far more functional, far more friendly, and perhaps a far more competent head coach of the Browns than they've seen in 10 years. Focusing solely on the Xs and Os of the game, which have always been Mangini's strength anyway, Mangini seems to be thriving in his element.

This isn't a playoff team yet. There are still several holes to fill. But there's no longer reason to shake your head at those who feel good about the direction of this team as if they are stuck in some sort of mid-80s time warp. After all, I'm now one of them, too.