



As a football player, Jim Brown deserves all the respect in the world. Even today, 45 years after he abruptly walked away from football at age 29, he is still one of the defining players in the history of the NFL.

His career rushing record of 12,312 yards was an all time record that stood until Walter Payton surpassed it in 1984. Since then, seven other rushers have passed Brown's mark, set in the days of 12 and 14-game schedules, and yet Brown is still regarded by many knowledgeable students of football history as the greatest running back -- and perhaps the greatest player -- to ever set foot on an NFL field.

He is certainly the greatest player in Browns history. If anyone were to take that title from Brown, he would have to be a truly special player. Brown's combination of size, speed, coordination and power made him the perfect physical specimen for the gridiron. His intense competitive spirit made him a winner -- something that LeBron James, who was briefly considered the co-greatest athlete in Cleveland history with Brown, might have benefited from this past spring as the Celtics were mopping the floor with the Cavs in the playoffs.

Brown deserves to be remembered and revered for his contributions to the Browns organization in his playing days. No other Browns player will ever wear No. 32, and when the Browns introduce their ring of honor next month, Brown's name should be the first revealed, even before Otto Graham, Paul Brown or Lou Groza, who all won more championships than Brown. It is because Brown was that great as a player, and he is that important to the history of the organization.

...To the *history* of the organization.

Brown has still hung around the Browns organization, on and off, since retiring. But football was never really a priority of his once he pulled off the shoulder pads for good. He sowed his wild oats as an actor in Hollywood, he threatened to return to action with the Raiders in 1983 when Franco Harris was within striking distance of his all-time rushing record. He became a community activist by founding the Amer-I-Can program, helping to steer inner-city youths in Los Angeles away from gangs and drugs.

But he was still Jim Brown. And when Randy Lerner assumed control of the Browns after his father's death in 2002, he needed an advisor. Someone with a football background who could give him an insider's perspective on what to look for in front office personnel, coaches and maybe even scouting players.

Brown had his hand up, and Lerner couldn't say no to an all-time great. Brown was hired on as an executive advisor to Lerner, reportedly making a six-figure salary in the role.

If Brown was a figurehead, a community ambassador in charge of making public appearances on behalf of the team, there would have been no harm in giving a revered alumnus a cushy front-office job. But, based on what has happened since Mike Holmgren took the reins of the team last December, it appears Brown held real sway within the organization.

Earlier this year, Holmgren told Brown that his services as an advisor were no longer needed, essentially firing Brown on the spot. According to media reports, the Browns have also curtailed their monetary contributions to the Amer-I-Can program.

Brown was understandably upset, and now a rift exists between the rushing great and the team with which he has been virtually synonymous for almost half a century. There is reportedly a significant chance that Brown will not show up to the team's ring of honor introduction ceremony during the Browns home opener on Sept. 19. Even if he does show up, it might be with a coating of ice.

Perhaps at some point in the future, the relationship can be repaired. But at this point, how Jim Brown feels about the Browns, and his dismissal from the organization, just isn't important.

Right now, keeping Brown happy should be pretty far down the list of priorities for a team that has been one of the league's laughing stocks since returning to action in 1999.

Jim Brown, at 74 and with little pro football experience over the past 45 years, would appear to not know very much about how to run a modern NFL team. If he has been the man advising Lerner on the Phil Savage and Romeo Crennel hires, on giving Eric Mangini total control of the football operations, the evidence would seem to bear that out. And if Lerner took Brown's advice to heart, it simply underscores how unqualified he was as the decision-making head of an NFL franchise, and how relieved we should all be that Holmgren agreed to take over the top decision maker's role.

Really, Lerner tabbing Brown as an advisor on football matters makes about as much sense as Larry Dolan hiring 91-year-old Bob Feller as an advisor on baseball matters. Feller has the same advisor qualifications as Brown. He was an all-time great on the field, and he's opinionated. That's about it.

If Brown did have Lerner's ear to the point that Holmgren felt he needed to dismiss him in order to achieve the rank and file he desired, then showing Brown the door was unquestionably the right move, no matter how hurt Brown might be. Knowing that Brown is fiercely proud and rather temperamental, chances are he wasn't going to take his dismissal laying down. There was going to be some kind of public backlash from Brown. It's just the way he is.

Holmgren should simply continue to remain positive about the matter, demand that everyone else in the organization do the same, and go about his business secure in knowing he made the right move.

Holmgren is in the business of this team's present and future. Of trying to rescue the wayward expansion Browns, give them an organizational rudder and pilot them back to contention. If any visitors from the team's past are trying to pass Holmgren notes, coaching from the sidelines like overzealous soccer dads, telling him what they think he should do, it's needless clutter at best and an outright insult to Holmgren at worst. Holmgren shouldn't, and won't, put up with the possibility of that.

The Browns owe a lot to Jim Brown: gratitude, respect, his name engraved on any team plaque or monument that is worth anything. But they don't owe him a job. And they certainly don't owe him the chance to put his rubber stamp on personnel moves.

Jim Brown is an integral part of the Cleveland Browns' past. But only the past. It took Randy Lerner about eight years to finally hire someone who could stand up and tell him that.