

## Just Another Opener

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, September 09 2010 10:15 AM - Last Updated Thursday, September 09 2010 5:09 PM

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It's opening week for the Cleveland Browns and though there are plenty of fans excited about that prospect there are probably more that no longer know what to think. This is what it's like when you know before the season opens that your team won't be playing for a championship.

It's not that the Browns are hopeless at the moment. Indeed this is a team that looks to be one of the more improved teams in the league, if not in results than at least in direction. But that's not much of a consolation prize to fans in a town who have borne witness to a very dispiriting baseball season and are about to bear witness to a basketball season where a .500 record will be considered an accomplishment.

Personally, I'm tired of adjusting expectations in order to figure out a way to make these hometown teams look successful. At some point the Indians, the Browns and the Cavaliers are going to have to find a way to adjust their expectations instead and figure out how to actually be successful and be truly worth of the fans that support them.

They all talk a good game, of course. Indians president-in-waiting, Mark Shapiro, has nothing if not the gift of gab. But he's done nothing to articulate a coherent plan for returning the team to a level of success the fans tasted in the late '90s, mainly because that plan depended on money and his plan depends on everything but.

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Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert is well financed and has a knack for success. But he's facing major headwinds. His team lost its most valuable asset and at the moment it seems incomprehensible to think that a player with anything approaching that level of talent will find his way to Cleveland outside of a magic ping pong ball.

But this is football season so for the moment we can cast aside those depressing scenarios for another, hopefully brighter, one.

We've heard from Browns president Mike Holmgren, as decent of a man as exists in the game, talk passionately about restoring a once proud tradition. Holmgren has done mostly right by his words, bringing in Tom Heckert, for example, to be his general manager.

And yet all of us, from Holmgren to Heckert to Eric Mangini to the guy cleaning the lint guards at the local Laundromat know that fixing what ails this franchise isn't a one-year job. That's the problem.

Holmgren and Heckert know there isn't enough talent on this team. That message came through loud and clear in the first roster Heckert put together and in what he said afterward. It came through loud and clear in the amount of roster turnover that there's been just since Mangini got here. Finally, it came through loud and clear in its almost shocking lack of homegrown players.

Heckert and Holmgren are realists, which is oddly refreshing. They know that it will take several drafts to get them to a respectable level. The problem that they face is that the NFL, like every other sports league, is an endless spin cycle in which anything can go wrong at almost any time. Fix one area of the team and a leak will spring from another.

When Phil Savage was handed the job as general manager, he too took a long and realistic look at the roster with owner Randy Lerner and determined that there were very few core players on it. He then went about trying to fix that problem and made some good decisions in the process, not unlike what Heckert and Holmgren are doing now. And yet, not even two years removed from Savage and the Browns are essentially reworking pretty much everything he did.

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That may be an indictment of sorts on Savage certainly but it's also an acknowledgement that professional athletes are so much more than the sum of their parts. You can have a young player grade out at the top on every conceivable metric and still not possess the internal wiring to make all of that talent work at the right time.

You can consider Matt Leinart as the current poster child for all that can go wrong when selecting your next franchise savior. He's big, has a decent arm, and played in a program that should have prepared him well for his vocation.

What Leinart lacked was something that can never be measured, an "it" factor that is the dividing line between potential and realization. Maybe his being cut by the Arizona Cardinals will be the wake-up call he needs. Likely it will not.

The problem for Arizona though goes much deeper. Where once they saw a key building block around whom they were trying to build a team now all they see is a series of make-shift moves in hopes that the damage done to the franchise for being wrong won't be too great. It will.

That's the problem with the Browns. Brady Quinn didn't work out and either did Derek Anderson. Who's to say that once the defense is fixed the offense won't need an overhaul? Jake Delhomme is in the last years of a decent career but Seneca Wallace ultimately is unproven and the league is literally littered with back up quarterbacks from big time programs like Texas who aren't good enough to start.

Holmgren's sobering assessment when he took over was that this team didn't get this way over night and it won't get better over night. They are the product of 10 years of poor personnel decisions, literally creating a roster with more holes to fill than time to fill it.

Every team has holes and it's an unattainable goal to think that any team, whether it's the Browns or the New England Patriots, will enter a season where there isn't at least one visible flaw.

But where the Browns fall short right now is the sheer amount of visible flaws. The trick for

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Heckert will be to get as many fixed as quickly as possible before new, longer term issues develop. But that won't be now, which gets us back to this season.

Does it really matter if the Browns finish 7-9 vs. 6-10 or even 5-11? Not really. What matters far more are the kinds of moves the team makes during the season in order to shore up its gaping holes. If Heckert can find another Matt Roth or two on the scrap pile, that's one or two less problems come season's end.

So as the Browns enter a season that offers little hope for redemption on the field, Browns fans enter another season in which hope is their only friend. That's fine and it beats many of the alternatives, but as a method of operation it's getting a little tiresome.

There's more reasons than not to believe that the present regime will eventually bring a few rays of sunshine our way. Let's just hope we don't die of frostbite in the meantime.