

Walking Two Paths At Once

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, September 15 2010 1:00 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, September 15 2010 8:32 AM



If you were surprised by the Cleveland Browns' loss to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the season's first week, perhaps you shouldn't have been. In something that is no small coincidence, the Browns had another starting quarterback to open the season and it's not as if those two things are unrelated.

One of the most obvious problems for the Browns is that they've been in a do-loop of transition and reinvention for the last decade. The lack of continuity is holding this franchise back and yet continuity for its own sake is hardly ever the answer either.

When Mike Holmgren took over this franchise he faced the same dilemma that everyone whose fingerprints are on this franchise has faced. Blow the damn thing up or try to make sense out of the mess he inherited. No small task making that decision so it's not a surprise that he did a little of each.

In somewhat of a nod to trying to have your cake and eat it to, Holmgren opted for continuity at the top by keeping head coach Eric Mangini and a refresh in the rest of the front office and at the quarterback position. Maybe it will be successful but then I'm reminded of the sage advice, oft repeated, that you can't ride two horses with one ass.

The problem with the approach was on full display Sunday. This isn't the time to get into a full fledged screed about whether or not Eric Mangini should have been retained. That ship has long since sailed. Instead, it is a reminder that decisions have consequences.

Mangini seems far more relaxed this season than last and I attribute that to the demotion he had to accept in order to retain his job. No longer responsible for the draft or even the final

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But there are certain things that come with a Mangini-coached team.

For example, in far too many games you're often going to be left wondering why his teams struggle to make adjustments at halftime and likewise struggle to make counter punches to the adjustments that opposing teams make. You're also going to be left wondering at least once a game about one questionable decision or another that he makes when the pressure is on.

Such a decision on Sunday was foregoing any of the three time outs that he had in his pocket on that crucial 4th and 3 play late in the fourth quarter. Somewhere a cogent explanation exists, but I haven't heard one yet. Essentially Mangini wanted to make sure he had the time outs later if he needed them rather than use them when he actually needed them. It's the kind of strange that tends to be part of the Mangini package.

The other thing with a Mangini-coached team is that they tend to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. That's somewhat a byproduct of having a roster of less talented, less experienced players. But it's not like the play calling was all that imaginative in the second half, either. It looked like offensive coordinator Brian Daboll was scared of taking a chance and that carried over onto the field.

You can put that directly on Daboll, but as Freud used to say, there are no accidents. Daboll is a product of those above him. Mangini is risk adverse. That's not a dig. Jim Tressel is as well. But where they differ is that Tressel is much better at making that aversion work for his teams than is Mangini, at least from what we've seen so far.

Holmgren's decision to blow certain things up though didn't have any better results on Sunday, either.

No one is ready to argue the point that Derek Anderson had a future in Cleveland. A few more may want to take on the debate over Brady Quinn but the point remains that the lack of

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Whatever else Jake Delhomme may be, he's not a long-term answer for this franchise. The chances of him even starting every game this year are slim, whether because of injury or ineffectiveness. The chances of him being the starting quarterback next season are even slimmer yet for much the same reasons. He may be a transition quarterback but exactly a transition to what isn't quite clear.

It's nice to have a higher level professional taking the snaps this season, no doubt. It gives an illusion that things will be better. But this franchise isn't going to be ready to take the next step until that position is settled for the long term which means it's no closer to being settled now than it was when Quinn, for example, was still on the roster.

Ultimately the reason Holmgren and folks in positions like his tend to try to play both sides against the middle is because fans, for whatever they may say publicly, have trouble accepting that their team is rebuilding. They see players wearing Browns uniforms playing against players wearing Steelers uniforms and assume that all things are mostly equal. But as the losses pile up because the talent level between the teams is so dramatic they forget all about the expectations that were laid in front of them from the outset and instead demand change immediately.

This isn't just a phenomenon in sports, by the way, it's just where it's most prevalent. The upcoming midterm elections are supposedly a referendum on the economy because most people just can't accept the fact that digging out of any hole takes longer than they patience they have for it.

That's certainly true with the Browns. Holmgren has been mostly straightforward with the fan base, letting them know this is going to take more than a few games and perhaps more than a few seasons before this franchise can return to prominence. But reading the message boards after the Browns loss suggests that very few got the message.

But I don't blame the fans. Despite Holmgren's words, his actions suggest that he is having trouble fully embracing the concept of a complete overhaul.

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But turning a blind eye as many fans have done, even at the implied suggestion of Holmgren, isn't going to do anyone any good. When the dust settles, the Browns still are a team in the early stages of a re-build and Delhomme is just another in a long line of quarterbacks who doesn't have a long-term future here.

This will change eventually, it has to. But until it does, fans are just going to have to accept the fact that games like last Sunday's are the norm and not the exception.

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