

## Finally: A Gatorade Smile

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

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Was that the hint of a smile when The Great Stoneface was doused with a vat of Gatorade near the end of the Browns' 34-14 victory over the New England Patriots?

More importantly, when in past seasons would any of head coach Eric Mangini's players have had the balls to give him an icy bath, no matter what the circumstances? That one gesture by the players on Sunday was more indicative of how the team has come together in the past 12 games than their 30-17 dismantling of the world champion New Orleans Saints two weeks ago or the romp over the Patriots, who had been described last week as "the best team in the NFL this season."

In the 10 short months since Mangini was relieved of all team-related duties except the title of head coach, news reports indicate that he has become a different person -- much to his credit.

I believe that we're watching the evolution of a championship football coach, much as his

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mentor evolved from a dispassionate, hard-headed, egotistical S.O.B. when he was with the Browns to the best head coach in the game with the aforementioned Patriots. (I'm referring to Bill Belichick, of course -- he of the eight Super Bowl rings. Oh, he only has three? It seems like so many more.)

Belichick, upon winning his first Super Bowl in 2004, said that he learned some valuable lessons during his tenure with the Browns (his first head coaching job). It appears that Mangini also learned some valuable lessons in his first head coaching post (the New York Jets) that he is now applying with the Browns.

An article in the *New York Times* recently suggested that "Mangini remains meticulous and thorough, obsessive even, but seems, if not gentler, then more relaxed." It also noted that "His Jets tenure provided a painful lesson in what happened when he deviated" (referring to Mangini's ill-fated encounter with injured quarterback Brett Favre, which ultimately resulted in the former's ouster from the Jets). With the Browns, "Mangini returned to his core principles, just coaching, as the same guy, he insisted, but more firm in his beliefs."

During last 22 months, Mangini has navigated a rocky road. Bloggers and posters on a bevy of forums have hurled every possible insult at him. On many occasions, local beat writers have even seemed to have it in for him, especially after he began his inaugural season here by losing 10 of 11 games.

Just last week, a *Boston Herald* pundit called Mangini "...the now obscure Browns boss." The article spoke directly to the coach: "Ah, Eric, seems so long ago you had a future, all so young and filled with Master Belichick's prophetic teachings. Now, you're sitting by Lake Erie trying to revive a Browns franchise that still hasn't recovered from Art Modell moving the original model to Baltimore."

Enough bad-mouthing the coach. He's been a miracle-worker on the order of Annie Sullivan, and this corner has never wavered in its belief in his head-coaching abilities. Last year, after the Browns had lost 10 of their first 11 games, it was noted here:

"Mangini cleared the roster of players who didn't high-step to his authority, no matter their talent level. He added free agents and traded for players who would toe the line ... until the overall

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roster could be upgraded in two to three years. Recently, Mangini showed signs that he's softening his hard-nosed attitude somewhat. Could he, too, still be learning?"

Over the past 12 games, the Browns have a 7-5 record. Take away a pair of pick-six interceptions thrown by Jake Delhomme and Seneca Wallace and they would be 9-3. (That's right: 9-3!) They have outscored opponents 252-212 over that span and have been extremely competitive in every game. This, despite having a roster that is rife with holes, from underperforming wide receivers, to aging defensive ends and linebackers, to dubious defensive backs. Not to mention the fact that five different quarterbacks have started those 12 games.

When Mangini came to the Browns in January, 2009, he was given too many hats.

Give him credit for agreeing to continue as head coach, even though his new boss, club president Mike Holmgren, is said to be chomping at the bit to prowling the sidelines again, possibly with the Browns.

Give Mangini credit for loosening up between the end of the 2009 season and the beginning of the 2010 season but not abandoning his gut and his principles.

Give him credit for getting the most out of an average group of players.

Most of all, give him credit for sculpting a team that is (1) tough and hard-nosed; (2) well prepared, week in and week out; (3) hustling their cumulative butts off; and, finally (4) a true representative of the blue-collar town of Cleveland, Ohio.

Could love be lovelier the second time around? It was with Belichick in New England, after the disaster in Cleveland/Baltimore. So, too, could it be with Mangini here, after the admitted disaster in New York.

Bring on more Gatorade, Brownies. We the fans have been more than ready for 14 years.