

## The Tree of Belichick – Myth, Curse or Just Another Day in the NFL?

Written by {ga=mattvan1}

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The superstitious among us will tell you that Cleveland teams are cursed, by either bad trades or bad karma or just plain old bad luck. There is no reason to rehash all of the heartbreak at this point – we all know the drill by now and the holidays are depressing enough without the added anguish. Unfortunately, there is yet another cause for alarm. A new threat has appeared on the horizon, one which, if a person were to believe in these types of things, appears to be highly toxic; almost lethal.

The firing of Josh McDaniels has led many of the national media types to re-examine the coaching tree of Bill Belichick. Rewind a few years and the tree was a Sequoia – spectacular, prolific and sure to live for a thousand years. Today, the conventional wisdom dictates the tree more closely resembles the one from “A Charlie Brown Christmas” – sad, spindly, and likely not to survive past the Meineke Car Care Bowl.

The unfortunate news for Browns fans, of course, is that the semi-holy trinity of the current staff - Mangini, Daboll, and Ryan - are all progeny of the Belichick tree. This places them, according to the Cursers, in the same head coaching pool as Romeo Crennel, Charlie Weiss, Josh McDaniels, Jim Swartz, Nick Saban, Kirk Ferentz, Al Groh, and Pat Hill. Saban, whose name was at one time allegedly spelled "Satan" and later changed, undoubtedly has had success in the college ranks wherever he has coached. Yet he didn't quite live up to expectations in the NFL. As long as you consider making a mess of the Dolphins in two short years, stating in a press conference, “I am not going to be the Alabama coach” and then accepting the Alabama job 13 days later not living up to expectations.

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Angst-ridden Cleveland fans are already battling against all manner of mysterious forces which are preventing the long awaited parade from circling Public Square. Are these latest revelations the harbinger of yet another curse? Or is the concept of learning at the feet of the master just an urban myth? Or, at the risk of proposing a Galileo-like absurdity, might there be a more logical explanation?

Jerry Glanville (from the Rick Forzano tree) was head coach of the Houston Oilers from '86-'89, and the Atlanta Falcons '90-'93. Via the magic of NFL Films, he once told us that "NFL" meant Not For Long. This was not only accurate, but quite possibly the only time Glanville ever said anything of value. The pro football landscape is littered with the flotsam of successful coordinators who, for various reasons, flamed out once they accepted a head coaching position. The Disciples of Bill all appeared ready - some had Super Bowl rings, others were praised for the performance of the units they coached. There is no doubt Belichick is one of the best coaches in history. As Bum Phillips (from the Sid Gillman tree) once said, "He may not be at the head of his class, but it don't take long to call roll." So we have seemingly very capable coordinators on the staff of a brilliant football mind with multiple rings and yet not one of them has gone on to have success as a head coach in the NFL. What happened?

Football happened. While every successful coach, at any level in any sport, has learned from his or her supervisors along the way, there is only one Paul Brown, one Tom Landry, one Bill Walsh, and one Bill Belichick. Often imitated but never duplicated. Building a winning football team is not a matter of pedigree. The right background does not hurt, although it is much like investing in collateralized debt obligations – *past performance is no guarantee of future results*.

One can argue forever on the key elements of a successful program, but at some point winning teams, especially now, exhibit some combination of the following:

*Talent at key positions* – Not everywhere, but at least a few playmakers on both sides of the ball. Long gone are the days of the 70's Steelers with HOF players at seemingly every position. Quality scouting departments (Phil Savage aside), a ridiculous number of bowl games, pro days, the NFL Combine, and the science of the draft make it nearly impossible to field a team overflowing with Pro Bowlers. Teams must be able to win games with average players at multiple spots. A flexible scheme and the ability to put players in positions where they can succeed is critical. As is

*Quality depth* – Injuries are part of the game and, unless the team bus runs into Lake Erie on

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the way to CBS, no longer an excuse. Depth is usually a direct result of solid drafts mixed with a few below the radar signings during FA. Depth not only helps when guys are hurt, it also creates competition through the season – always a good thing.

*A Quarterback* – One of the most startling changes in the makeup of the game and it has happened, it seems, almost overnight. You must have a very good QB to win, or at least one who is hot/having a good season. Not necessarily elite, but Trent Dilfer throwing 10 times a game leading the offense to two field goals and hoping your defense scores so you win 13-3 seems Canton Bulldog-like.

*Players who buy-in to the system* – The NFL locker room is a complex social organism which would require an army of psychoanalysts to even begin to try and explain the power of collective belief. Football, more than any other sport, is about coaching, but not in ways most believe. Scheme, X's and O's, adjustments are all important; but nothing is more vital than getting and maintaining buy-in, especially from the veterans. Winning coaches have it. Unsuccessful coaches do not.

Many current NFL coaches, regardless of whether they are assistants or coordinators or the head guy, have worked under Bill Belichick. This would tend to happen when a man has been a head coach in the NFL for 16 years. It's simply the law of averages. As time has shown, simply living in the presence of Mr. Bill does not a head coach make. The current state of the Belichick tree is not marginally different than the Bill Cowher tree (Chan Gailey, Ken Wisenhunt, Marvin Lewis). Yikes. In the NFL, your resume is far less important than your talent, depth, QB, and ability to connect with your players. All of those four elements were lacking, often severely, on teams led by the "great coordinator unsuccessful head coach" group.

The Browns are in dire need of a few more playmakers and some depth along the OL. They just might have a QB, but one thing is certain - Mangini has buy-in from the team and those cats come to play ever Sunday. As far as curses go, I lived in New Orleans for a time. The Saints were of course cursed, having never won a playoff game, then never reaching the Super Bowl. This run of one depressing season after another was perhaps due to the religious tie-in which, as the story was told to me, angered God. I guess God forgave the Saints when Drew Brees became their quarterback.