

## Singing From Different Hymnals

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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For the second straight Tuesday, Cleveland Browns head coach Eric Mangini had to explain a crushing defeat against an arguably inferior opponent. For the second straight week he also had to defend his record against a growing chorus of disbelievers by saying that he believes the Browns are headed in the right direction.

Forget about all those who are claiming that Mangini needed to win X number of the season's last 4 games to retain his job. The only real questions that will matter to team president Mike Holmgren is whether or not the Browns are indeed headed in the right direction and whether or not Mangini is the guy who can drive them the furthest down that path.

That the Browns seem headed in the right direction seemed pretty obvious until two weeks ago. Almost everything about this year's team after 12 weeks was far better than everything about last season's team after 12 games. For starters, consider just the record. The Browns last year were 1-11. this year's version was 5-7. Beyond just that most visceral difference was a boat load of statistics on both sides of the ball. More touchdowns, better running, less points given up, far closer games, take your pick.

But the last two games against two other league doormats in Buffalo and Cincinnati have changed the perceptions about the direction of this team measurably. The games have been close, certainly, but anyone watching knows that the Browns have been handled in both games. The same cliches that were true 50 years ago about football are just as true today. Games tend to be won or lost along the offensive and defensive lines and in the last two games the Browns have lost those battles to teams that collectively had less wins than they did. It's been demoralizing.

It's also a disturbing trend certainly but it's more disturbing only if you think that progress or

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decline is a straight line process in the first place. It never is.

Mangini called the last two games hiccups, meaning that he doesn't believe they are really representative of where this team is headed. What Holmgren needs to figure out first is whether or not that's true. If they are as Mangini suggests, then far more representative of this team in his view is the way the team played against New Orleans and New England.

But surely that can't be true either for if it were this Browns team would be a playoff contender and I think that if there is one thing everyone can agree on it's that this team is not a playoff contender.

So let's just say that neither of those two game stretches represents the real Browns and erase them from the record and evaluate this team on a 12 game basis, which seems the kind of reasonable approach Holmgren might employ. That means that heading into games against Pittsburgh and Baltimore, two teams that need to keep winning, the team is 3-7, which really fits this team like a glove anyway.

When a team sits at 3-7 it really is hard to say which direction it's headed in and that's why, to a certain extent, Mangini's pleas in that regard tend to fall on deaf ears. There were times, certainly, when everyone felt that former general manager Phil Savage had this team headed in the right direction, too, and for many of the same reasons.

Savage decided to rebuild the offensive line and drafted Joe Thomas and signed Eric Steinbach, the two stalwarts of the offensive line still. He seemed to pull off a draft coup by getting Brady Quinn late in the first round after he already had drafted Thomas. Savage also went about trying to upgrade the receiving corps by complementing Braylon Edwards with Donte Stallworth. Savage also pulled off trades to bolster the defensive line, trades that seemed to make most people optimistic if not giddy. The linebacking corps remained a weak spot as did the defensive backfield, particularly on the corners. But then the team Savage took over had so many holes that they all couldn't be filled at once.

The larger point is, though, that there was a time when Savage could rightly claim the team was headed in the right direction and it didn't just seem plausible, it seemed true. As it turned out, of course, Savage wasn't really headed in any particular direction. A scout at heart, he was

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collecting players like they were bubble gum cards but the approach lacked cohesion. Savage also entrusted his collection to a coach with absolutely no ability to make any sense out of it so whatever Savage accomplished ended up looking even more disjointed anyway.

This is all to suggest that some of the telltale signs that Mangini points to as indicative of a team headed in the right direction are things we've all seen before. That doesn't mean that Mangini's view isn't any less or more plausible or any more or less true than what we heard from Savage. It does mean that Mangini, like Savage, is solidly vested in his way of doing things so it follows naturally that Mangini is going to defend what he's done.

The task for Holmgren is to wade through the sea of self-interest and try to make sense of it all. It won't be easy. That's because as confusing as last season may have been, particularly in the way it ended, this season has done little to add clarity.

When Holmgren rode into town last season, the team was out of control. Holmgren was given free reign to fix it all, yesterday. That didn't seem like a good sign for Mangini. But then a funny thing happened on the way to Holmgren's trying to make sense of it all. The team inexplicably rallied around Mangini at his darkest hour and went on to win the season's final four games. If it all left the fans scratching their heads, imagine how confusing it must have been to Holmgren.

This season hasn't gotten any easier. There have been times, stretches actually, where the direction seemed clear and you could find few if any who didn't think it was right, just like Savage in the early years. But then there have been times, stretches as well, where the direction seems as muddled as anything that Savage brought to the table. Even if you discount the last two games, it's not as if the Browns were trending positively before that. The wins against Miami and Carolina seemed gifted more than anything else and in each you could clearly see that what has plagued the team recently was a product of what was developing then. The offensive game plan was growing stagnant and the defense was getting pushed around.

In other words, at exactly the point where the direction should be its clearest, the Browns seem as confusing as ever. In the last two weeks Mangini, Colt McCoy and Peyton Hillis all offered that the team seems to lack focus or energy. This isn't some media-created controversy but the honest observations from those closest to the situation.

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That will get noticed by Holmgren, certainly because it goes exactly to where this team is headed. It's one thing to abide a team that's less talented as you work to improve it. It's another to abide a team that has stopped working hard as the season plays out its string.

But even if Holmgren is convinced that the Browns, despite recent signs, are headed in the right direction, the next question and perhaps the key to Mangini's future is whether or not Holmgren thinks Mangini is the guy to get them the furthest down that path. If anything, this question seems like the easiest to answer, at least from afar.

There has never been a sense that Mangini is Holmgren's kind of guy on a number of levels, from the way Mangini handles his quarterbacks to the way he handles his offense, to the way he handles the media. It's not so much anything that Holmgren has actually said but more so what he hasn't said. Though he kept Mangini around for the 2010 season, Holmgren has never once stood up and said "this is my guy." There's been no impassioned defense of the coach or his way of doing things. It's been a lot of sitting back and observing and dropping phrases like "I'm not sure what the offense is trying to do" and "I'll evaluate it all come season's end."

If Holmgren is going to keep Mangini after what's amounted to about a 20-game audition, then it will be because he's absolutely convinced that Mangini shares his vision. But there are just too many signs suggesting that isn't the case. In the end, if Mangini goes it won't be because he lost to Buffalo and Cincinnati. It will be because Holmgren finally recognizes the awesome responsibility he undertook when he signed on with Randy Lerner in the first place and realizes that the only way to attack that responsibility is with guys singing from your hymnal. Whatever else you might say or think about Mangini, it's always been clear that he is most comfortable standing in his own pew singing his own songs.