

Can We Still Be Friends?

Written by {ga=mrburns}

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We seem to be back where we started with Eric Mangini. I wasn't alone in surprise when Mike Holmgren decided to retain him last winter, but after so many close, early losses in 2010 Mangini's dismissal once again seemed inevitable. While the team always played hard, it wasn't until the stretch of games against the Saints, Patriots, and Jets that Mangini swung that pendulum in the other direction. But alas, consecutive losses to the Bills and Bengals, with only the Ravens and Steelers remaining mean that the smart money is once again on Mangini getting sacked.

In retrospect, bringing Mangini back (essentially on probation) was a very savvy move by Mike Holmgren. If Mangini had worked out, Holmgren would have found his coach and he would have looked like a genius. As that now seems unlikely, Mangini's eventual replacement didn't have to absorb the fans' frustration during a tough season of roster transition. Now nobody will whine that Mangini wasn't given a fair shot, and Holmgren also managed to save Randy Lerner some money (although \$3 million to Lerner - he of the \$1.5 billion net worth - is probably analogous to 20 bucks for most Browns fans). Perhaps most importantly, Holmgren might have a more attractive field of potential coaches out there this off-season, as the cupboard looked pretty bare last January.

When you get right down to it, the 2010 Browns have largely played hard all year, and all of their games have been competitive. These Browns have lost only two games by double-digits; including an 18-point loss in Pittsburgh which was skewed by a garbage time Roethlisberger touchdown, and a 10-point loss at home to Atlanta that the Browns were winning before Seneca Wallace got hurt, forcing Jake Delhomme to come in and do his Jake Delhomme things. What is extremely frustrating about all of those close losses is that you get the sense that some of them could have been coached into wins with better adjustments and more aggressive decision-making. We can argue about whether or not Mangini is an average or above-average coach, but the guy has proven that he's a legitimate professional head coach; Chris Palmer, he

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is not.

I am not trying to trash Eric Mangini, but it's time for both he and the Cleveland Browns to move on, and for largely organizational reasons. Eric Mangini football is not Mike Holmgren football. Maybe I'm misreading things, but doesn't Mangini seem like the NFL torch-bearer for the style of play that has fairly or unfairly been branded "Tressel-ball?" Mangini wants to suffocate the opposition on defense while playing a very conservative, ball-control offense that waits for opponents to beat themselves with a crucial error. When that strategy works it's fine, but it's not a recipe for consistent success in a league where the team who's better at throwing the football usually wins, in spite of what Rex Ryan might tell the media.

If Mangini had proven to be Vince Lombardi, Bill Belichick, or even Jeff Fisher, then it would make sense for Mike Holmgren and the Browns to keep him around. The problem is that Mangini seems to be pretty average – George Costanza would say he falls "right in the meaty part of the curve."

Mike Holmgren needs to bring in a coach who is singing off the same song sheet, so to speak. Eric Mangini's successor doesn't have to be a zealous Holmgren disciple, but he should at least subscribe to the same religion. Holmgren needs someone with whom he can create more synergy than he has with Mangini.

In Cleveland, we know a thing or two about cutting ties with coaches - it's basically become a ritual killing which occurs every 24 to 36 months. The difference this time is that when both parties go their separate ways, both should be better off.

The Browns are certainly in better shape now than when Mangini arrived on the scene nearly two years prior, and at least part of that is Mangini's doing. By the same token, Mangini came to the Browns unfairly portrayed by the New York media as an arrogant know-nothing who doubled as a dictator.

The beginning of Mangini's tenure did little but reinforce those ill-founded beliefs. However, since the end of the 2009 season not only have the Browns returned to respectability, but Mangini's reputation around the league has recovered, too. If Eric Mangini gets a pink slip in the near future he won't be viewed as some kind of football pariah as he may have one year

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ago, and with the way the NFL recycles coaches he's virtually guaranteed another top job in the future.

This is a breakup that can ultimately be a positive for both parties. Ideally, the Browns will get a new head coach whose ideology is closer to Holmgren's (bearing in mind that Holmgren himself is a viable candidate), and Mangini can eventually migrate to a franchise with a philosophy more aligned with his own. Eric, we've had a good run, we appreciate what you've done for the Cleveland Browns, and yes – we can still be friends.