

The Media Made Me Do It

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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There's a theory floating around out there that applies equally to deposed Cleveland Browns head coach Eric Mangini and deposed Michigan Wolverines coach Rich Rodriguez. It was the media, in the back, with a word processor.

Neither Mangini nor Rodriguez were particularly successful in their most recent jobs, mind you. Both had showed some progress but in an era where the average person gets frustrated when his email goes unanswered for more than 5 minutes, progress is now measured in weeks and not years. Yet apparently there is a vocal minority out there, including several columnists, that are trying to advance the theory that the firings of each were media inflicted..

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If this were 30 years ago there's every reason to believe that both Mangini and Rodriguez would have been retained for another year. The pressure management in each case felt from a disgruntled fan base would have been far less. People got their news at 6 and 11 and read one newspaper a day. But information and speculation these days is instantaneous and it takes almost no effort to inform and incite a fan base.

That's not to say, though, as the vocal minority still pining for the halcyon days of Mangini and Rodriguez are suggesting, that either was fired as the result of a lynch mob banging at the doors of each entity's athletic facilities. But it is to suggest that a large part of the downfall in each case was media related, just not media inflicted.

Remember this. The local media serves as the proxy for the fans. Treat them poorly and it's as if you're treating the fans poorly. Treat them well, take the time to get to know them and work with them and you'll be viewed in a far different light.

You don't need to take that as a leap of faith. Consider Mangini's interview published in Friday's Cleveland Plain Dealer where he admitted that one of his major shortcomings was the fact that he didn't take the time to explain his vision or the process he'd go about to achieve that vision.

Well, duh. If that's Mangini's mea culpa for treating the media with contempt, then we'll accept the apology and hope that if he ever gets the chance again he'll do better in that regard. But there can be no doubt that this was in fact a major shortcoming and one that significantly handicapped his ability to connect with the fan base that Mangini claims to love.

It's puzzling, actually, why Mangini chose to be so truculent with the media instead of using it to enhance his status. If he's really the engaging person that others claim him to be, then the task would have been rather easy. Bill Belichick was an ass (and mostly still is) to the local media in his tenure here and Mangini was on hand to witness it and the attendant fall out. Belichick's relationship alienated the fans from the team they loved and to this day it still informs how the locals feel about Belichick despite his success elsewhere. It's fair to suggest that this widening gulf was at least partly responsible for the Browns moving in the first place. The fans were that fed up.

In much the same way that will be Mangini's legacy as well and for that he only has himself to

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blame but at least he recognizes it.

In Michigan, Rodriguez will eventually come to the same conclusion. By all accounts he wasn't a Mangini-level jerk to the local press, but neither was he forthcoming with them about all the various issues surrounding him and the program. But where Rodriguez fell short was in failing to better manage the perceptions about him. That would have required a level of maturity he doesn't appear to possess, but it was still something within his grasp to control.

Sure, there are those that are at least trying to put a positive spin on Rodriguez's time in Ann Arbor. But it's mostly being done by minimizing his missteps and focusing on barely discernible progress, much the same as it is with Mangini.

But just as with Mangini, there's no reason to be revisionist. It's been theorized that Rodriguez didn't connect with Michigan fans because he wasn't a "Michigan Man." Well, either was Bo Schembechler, who played at Miami University and first coached at Ohio State. But a career of doing the right things in the right ways turned him into a Michigan man, even if he never did win a national championship. The same easily could have held true for Rodriguez.

The reason Rodriguez didn't connect with Michigan fans had everything to do with the way Rodriguez came in, a carpetbagger mentality intact, and his continuing inability to appreciate that Michigan wasn't a weigh station to the next job but the end of the rainbow.

Rodriguez didn't just engage in missteps. He made major errors. First of all, he absolutely stiffed the administration and the players at West Virginia, his alma mater in bolting for Michigan. He had just agreed to a new contract with a hefty multi-million dollar buyout and then tried to wiggle out of paying that exit fee by claiming that it was West Virginia that actually breached its agreement with him. Talk about not managing your image.

It was a thin, lawyer-concocted argument that didn't wash and ultimately forced Michigan to step up and pay the buyout. But of course there was more.

Next was the classless way Rodriguez left in the first place. His first words weren't to the

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players he had recruited to West Virginia that he was now abandoning. It was to Terrelle Pryor, then the hottest recruit in the country and someone Rodriguez was first trying to lure to West Virginia and then, of course, to Michigan. That worked out when Pryor chose Ohio State instead.

Then, like a petulant child, Rodriguez couldn't just say bygones and move on. Instead he destroyed all of the records of his current players at West Virginia, making it tougher on the next coach, a former assistant of Rodriguez's, who then had to create the records from scratch.

There was the shady real estate venture that Rodriguez got himself roped into that caused another distraction, but that was minor stuff compared to the first institutional violations in Michigan football history. Michigan apologists like to call these much ado about nothing but they were major violations mainly because they were committed with the intent to give Michigan a competitive advantage.

Throw in all of the defections and recruiting mishaps and Rodriguez pretty much demonstrated in virtually every step he made as Michigan's coach that his hiring met every definition of a mistake that there is.

So before we start getting all weepy for Rodriguez or Mangini, let's not forget that most of their mistakes were self-inflicted. The on-the-field record was certainly important, but far more detrimental to their job security was the image they conveyed to a media sitting there to record every painful second along the way.