

Making the Right Hire

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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It's hard to tell whether the Cleveland Browns' search for a new head coach is winding down or gearing up. Candidates have come and gone. Interviews have been held and cancelled. Others never got scheduled. But the consensus seems to be emerging that St. Louis Rams' offensive coordinator Pat Shurmur is the front runner for the job. Mind you it's a media consensus, so take that for what you will. The people charged with making the decision haven't given any such clues.

Still it wouldn't surprise if Shurmur is indeed the choice. He fits the typical new hire profile for a NFL head coach.

Selecting a head coach is probably one of the most difficult tasks an owner or a general manager or, at the college level, an athletic director, is ever going to have. A head coach has to be part public relations expert, babysitter, arbitrator, facilitator, father figure, tough uncle, schematic genius, quick thinker, drill sergeant and chief motivator. Those aren't traits that are in ready supply and head coach is not a job that can be done well if you fall short in any of those skills.

The new hire doesn't have to have all those skills immediately. Often time you're projecting development and growth. Ultimately, though, whatever shortcomings that new head coach has coming in have to be developed quickly. The time frame to demonstrate your abilities gets a tad shorter each year because these days most fans have the patience and attention spans of puppies.

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In college finding a new head coach tends to be easier because there is a pecking order to college programs. Urban Meyer, for example, followed the formula perfectly. He started small, worked hard and had success at each stop along the way. When he landed at Florida he was a fully-formed coach with an undeniable track record. It wasn't a surprise when he succeeded there as well.

And yet the science is far from perfect. Rich Rodriguez certainly seemed to have a similar resume as Meyer and yet crashed and burned in spectacular fashion in Michigan. It just highlights that even when all the stars seemed to be aligned nothing is guaranteed.

The NFL is harder. It doesn't have the kind of pecking order that college does. A coach doesn't start with one franchise, gain some success, and then move on to another presumably higher profile franchise. Thus an owner or a general manager has before him essentially two pools of candidates: former head coaches who have been fired and up and coming assistants. Occasionally an owner or general manager, usually from Cleveland, will pick from a third pool, assistants who have been passed over for years. Take it on faith: those hires never work out. There are also owners that occasionally dip into the college ranks but the success rate there is even worse than it is for former NFL head coaches. That's why it's rarely done.

So assuming that Holmgren really is looking at the two basic pools, there is little doubt he'll end up selecting someone from the up-and-comers lot.

Hiring a coach that's been fired elsewhere is always going to be a tough sell to a fan base. Consider, for example, Marty Mornhinweg, someone who had been floated earlier as a candidate for the Browns' job. He would have faced nearly insurmountable head winds. How would Holmgren explain replacing a guy who won 5 games in each of two seasons with a guy who won 5 games total in two seasons?

Any other former head coach faces the same kind of scrutiny. Mike Mularkey is an easier sell than Mornhinweg, but again his resume isn't really any different than Eric Mangini's. Mularkey had one winning season but it came on the heels of a 6-game winning streak to end the season. The Bills then fell back to 5-11 the following year. In that context it would seem so much like trading water to simply replace Mangini with Mularkey, at least to the fans.

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But that's what you get when you dip into the former coaches pool in the first place. There are very few Bill Belichick's swimming around. If you want to avoid that kind of scrutiny or the long odds of hooking the right candidate then the only other choice is to find someone from the up-and-coming assistants pool.

Every off season there are always a few in that pool whose heads rise above the others. Shurmur is one, Perry Fewell from the New York Giants is another. But there's no guarantee that a great assistant will be able to translate that success to the next level. Josh McDaniels washed out in Denver and now finds himself swimming with the Mularkeys and Mornhinwegs of the world. The same is true for Mangini.

But there are a number of current head coaches who came directly from that pool and have had great success. Mike Tomlin of the Pittsburgh Steelers comes immediately to mind. So, too, does Jeff Fisher of the Tennessee Titans and Andy Reid with Philadelphia.

Indeed, with very few exceptions, every NFL coach came up through that route. Some of the more recent hires, like John Harbaugh and Todd Haley, are meeting with some success. Others, like Brad Childress and Ken Whisenhut, are struggling. Most of the rest are somewhere in between.

Exactly where someone like Shurmur would fall on that spectrum is simply a guess. But if Holmgren's hedging his bets on making the right guess, then he'll find some things he really likes about Shurmur that likely will convince him that he'll be closer to Harbaugh, Haley and Tomlin than Childress and Whisenhut.

There is no right age when it comes to taking on a head coaching job, but if there were Shurmur fits. Born in 1965, he'll be 46 this year. That alone assures that he'll have at least a half generation on the players he'd be coaching. Wisdom doesn't always come with age, certainly, but there is at least something to be said for the experience that age brings.

But more than age comes Shurmur's particular brand of experience. To an old quarterbacks coach like Mike Holmgren, Shurmur must seem like a hand-in-glove fit. He worked for the Philadelphia Eagles from 1999-2008 as their quarterbacks coach, a time that coincides with Donovan McNabb's most productive years. From there Shurmur went on to St. Louis where he

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became offensive coordinator. It's not a stretch to say that Shurmur was most responsible for the development of rookie quarterback Sam Bradford. That development made the Rams one of the league's surprise teams of the year with a 7-9 record (the same as the Seattle Seahawks) after finishing 1-15 the year before.

That doesn't make Shurmur any kind of savior but it at least demonstrates some level of accomplishment that will be important to Holmgren when making his selection.

If Shurmur, or even Fewell, is the selection all the fans can do is take it on a leap of faith that the person making the decision, in this case, Holmgren, knows it when he sees it. The angst though comes thereafter because if either ends up not being the right person, then it will be 2 or 3 more years wasted and 4 or 5 years longer before this Browns' team gives the fans something real to cheer about.