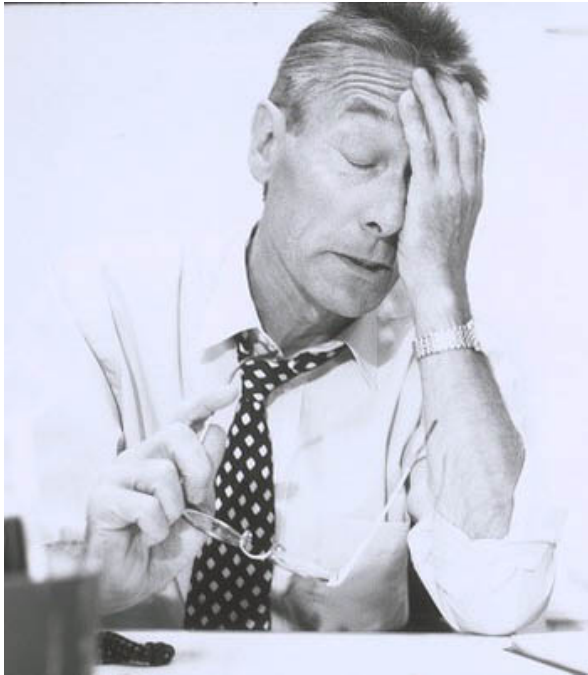


Another Friggin' Super Bowl

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, February 07 2011 7:00 PM - Last Updated Monday, February 07 2011 3:29 PM



One of the most beneficial uses of the Super Bowl each year is as a benchmark against which to judge, say, the Cleveland Browns. Call it a yearly reminder that the distance between Cleveland and the year's winner is at least 10 times greater than what Google Maps would otherwise say.

The Green Bay Packers and the Pittsburgh Steelers sit as this year's benchmark and based on their play on Sunday, and to paraphrase Bobby Jones talking about a young Jack Nicklaus, those teams play a game with which Cleveland fans aren't familiar.

The NFL is made up of 16 different Sundays where anything can happen on any given one. But the grind of the season proves that nothing happens by accident. The Browns could beat the Packers or the Steelers in any particular game perhaps but they are so far removed from being able to withstand the kind of grind it takes to win enough games to play in a Super Bowl that it's fair to wonder whether they really do play in the same league as those other teams. The gulf is that wide.

Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers probably said it best in his post-game interview when he called the game a microcosm of the Packers' entire season.

Another Friggin' Super Bowl

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, February 07 2011 7:00 PM - Last Updated Monday, February 07 2011 3:29 PM

The Packers had injuries to key players that they had to overcome. They found themselves at times almost completely clueless in how to advance the ball. And yet they eventually overcame all that was thrown at them to prevail against a really good Pittsburgh Steelers' team whose sum was certainly greater than the parts.

The game also could have served as a microcosm of the Browns' entire season but in counterpoint only. The Browns had their share of injuries. They had some pleasant surprises but more often than not looked clueless in how to advance the ball. Eventually they collapsed because their sum perfectly matched their parts.

Watching the Super Bowl can actually be quite depressing for Cleveland fans if you let it but it doesn't have to be, particularly if you use it as a learning tool and a parlor game.

For example, rather than create the usual checkerboard of potential scores and selling chances, you could fill those squares in with the names of ex-Browns or players the Browns should have drafted had they not had Coco the Clown and Ellen from Accounting doing the drafting all these years. Then it's a matter of seeing which player contributed the most to his team's play each quarter and paying the person holding the winning square accordingly.

As a learning tool, though, it's invaluable because it is a stark and constant reminder of why the Browns consistently fall short.

Let's start with coaching. In increments of two or three years at a time, the Browns constantly toy with the notion that they have hired the kind of coach that could lead this team to a Super Bowl. Eric Mangini serves as the most recent and convenient example.

One only needs to watch either the Packers' Mike McCarthy or the Steelers' Mike Tomlin in action to realize that Mangini was never going to lead this team anywhere important.

Tomlin and Mangini are basically the same age so it's a nice comparison. It may be great fodder for a theoretical debate because it has no answer, but that won't keep me from proclaiming here and now that had the Steelers hired Mangini instead of Tomlin there is simply

Another Friggin' Super Bowl

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, February 07 2011 7:00 PM - Last Updated Monday, February 07 2011 3:29 PM

no way they play in either of the last two Super Bowls they've been in. The difference between the two is that striking.

Where Mangini is dictatorial and conservative, Tomlin is inclusive and emotional. Mangini has a process he follows come Hell or high water and Tomlin goes with what works.

Tomlin, like Mangini, made his mark as a defensive coach, working his way up to defensive coordinator with Minnesota before Pittsburgh hired him. Tomlin's philosophy was honed through his work with Tampa Bay and its 4-3 and cover 2 approach. There is far less blitzing and much more reading and reacting.

Yet when Tomlin came to Pittsburgh, he decided to keep in place defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau whose approach is almost the polar opposite of Tomlin's. Pittsburgh plays the 3-4 and the zone blitz. They aren't called Blitzburgh simply because it's a cute name.

Rather than try to have LeBeau adopt to Tomlin, or even drop LeBeau in favor of someone of his own choosing, the opposite occurred and two Super Bowl appearances are the result.

Why do I sense that had Mangini been hired instead of Tomlin, Pittsburgh would be running a 3-4 defense with a different coordinator? It's because with Mangini he has an abiding, almost fatal flaw-like, belief in what he knows and an abject fear of what he doesn't.

The larger point is that what makes Tomlin a special coach is an innate understanding of the rhythm of his team and what makes Mangini a twice-fired head coach is an almost tone deaf approach to everything and everyone. Rather than pick on Mangini, though, you could easily insert the name of any coach the Browns have hired since they came back into the last few paragraphs and the outcome is the same.

This, I think, is the going to be the key going forward with new head coach Pat Shurmur. Either he learns from why Tomlin is special or he falls into the trap of his own hubris. In Cleveland, the Browns have always gotten the latter. It's now time to try the former.

Another Friggin' Super Bowl

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, February 07 2011 7:00 PM - Last Updated Monday, February 07 2011 3:29 PM

But it's not just coaching, either. It's talent. Other than Joe Thomas, there isn't a Browns player on either their starting offense or defense that would have started for either Pittsburgh or Green Bay. Surely the Steelers would have liked to have had Alex Mack as their back up center and I'm sure T.J. Ward and Joe Haden could find contributing roles in both teams' defensive backfields and perhaps Peyton Hillis and Eric Steinbach would see spot duty as well, but that's as far as it goes.

The reason the Packers could lose two defensive backs and their best receiver in the first half of the Super Bowl and still win the game has everything to do with the fact that they don't just have better starters, they have better reserves than the Browns, too. Indeed, most of the Packers' reserves and a good portion of the Steelers' as well would start for the Browns.

At this point in the Browns' existence, over a decade back from purgatory, there simply is no reason that this team should compare so unfavorably with the Super Bowl participants in talent level. Ok, there is a reason, the aforementioned Coco the Clown and Ellen from Accounting that were running the personnel department for the last 11 years.

But the Browns are long past excuses as to why in a league with a hard salary cap they can't consistently compete with any upper tier team, let alone Super Bowl teams.

Team president Mike Holmgren seems to understand the point but a lack of understanding has never been the problem anyway. It's an inability to execute. And unless that changes another decade will have passed, 20 other teams will have played in Super Bowls and Browns fans will still won't be any closer to watching the confetti rain down on their team.