

## Born Again, Again

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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With the Cleveland Browns on the verge of yet another re-birth, I've started to appreciate exactly how the Octomom must have felt after she had already popped out about 4 or 5 of those babies: again?

This is hardly the road less traveled for this Browns' franchise and its fans. Truth be told, this franchise and its fans have traveled down every conceivable road, boulevard, passageway, path and patch in search of some sort of Holy Grail only to find themselves, like a kid playing Chutes and Ladders, always climbing right back to the beginning square. To say the Browns have been going in circles is to say that Congress and the President have been in gridlock, pick an administration.

So in that respect, I'm worn out before another season even starts from having to figure out if this time owner Randy Lerner has gotten it right. I sense that this latest combination of president, general manager and head coach meshes far better than last year's oddly misfit group where Eric Mangini tried as best he knew how to suppress his more assholeish instincts for the better part of the season in order to hang on to a job that he lost about two minutes after Lerner put in that first call to Mike Holmgren.

But really, given the past there is far more reason to believe that this group, too, will flame out like every other group before it dating back to Bill Belichick's first turn as a head coach, or perhaps Bud Carson's than there is that it will be successful. It's not that the Browns are cursed, but it may be that the Lerner family is.

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Nonetheless, the one aspect of Lerner's ownership I've liked has been his willingness to spend money, often foolishly. He's far lower profile certainly than an abject goof like Dan Snyder in Washington, but I'll bet if you ran the figures in how many millions Lerner has paid out (and probably still is) to coaches and other front office types who no longer work for the Browns and compare it to the many millions Snyder has blown on ridiculous player acquisitions, the numbers would be closer than most people suspect.

Still it's great fun to watch the rich spend carelessly. It actually is a powerful incentive to work hard just to get in the position where the biggest criticism leveled against you is that you wasted several million of your billions.

What I haven't like about Lerner's ownership though is that he doesn't seem all that interested in eliminating the raging naïveté he has about how the business of the NFL is conducted. He's made a good pick in someone like Holmgren who understands the various ins and outs. But because Lerner is so much like Arthur (the Dudley Moore version and not the Russell Brand version, mainly because I didn't see the Russell Brand version because I just knew it would suck) while most of the rest of the owners are rich white guys with actual track records of running successful businesses, it makes me nervous. Jerry Jones is a good check and balance against whatever coach he has in there this week because Jerry has always been successful. In Cleveland there is no check and balance against Holmgren's basic instincts, even if those instincts are generally the right ones, because to date Lerner's biggest success was winning a lawsuit against the guy who blew millions of Lerner's dollars in an investment scheme a few years back.

To this point I think Tom Heckert's moves as general manager have all been the right ones. None of the players he let go will be missed. More of the players he's drafted have legitimate futures than those of his predecessors. He hasn't rushed into free agency as a quick fix, preferring first to build from within. It's a subtle recognition, really, that this team isn't one or two players away from a Super Bowl. That strikes me as healthy.

I'm also coming around pretty well on Pat Shurmur as head coach if for no other reason than he isn't constantly trying to convince everyone that, gosh, c'mon guys, he really is the head coach. Mangini always had a bit of an inferiority complex mixed in with a healthy amount of little man's syndrome that ended up poisoning the masses and sabotaging his career. In both New York and Cleveland, Maningi had locker rooms full of discontented malcontents willing to tear down the coach at every turn to whomever might be listening, be it other players or the media. Sure, some of these misanthropes weren't ever going to get with anyone's program but their own, but yet there was much about the way Mangini conducted himself that created an almost perfect

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environment for these seeds of discontent to germinate.

The real first test for Shurmur isn't when the Browns play a rivalry game but when there is the first losing streak and everyone associated with the franchise starts walking around Berea with a longer face than Jimmy Stewart's. Shurmur will have to turn those frowns upside down in a genuine way that convinces the players that there's a reason to follow his lead. Having never quite been tested that way in the NFL, there's no way to know at the moment how he'll respond. Yet the trends seem good if for no other reason then he doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would panic.

The other thing is that as I sift my way through the preseason with absolutely no deference or respect given to the game against Chicago, which should be required viewing only for prisoners on death row, it's hard not to like the direction of the offense.

First, it's not risk averse but risk mitigation. Perhaps the Browns' most frustrating year was Derek Anderson's second as a starter. The sum total of the offense was run off tackle, throw long, throw longer, punt. It had the creativity level of another Jenna Elfman sitcom. It wasn't an accident that the Browns scored less than a copier salesman at BW-3.

Last season's offense was a horse of a far different hue but not any more successful. It wasn't so much coordinated as it was orchestrated to produce the occasional element of surprise. But the gimmicks ran out about the 3rd game of the season and only some smoke and mirrors plays by rookie Colt McCoy kept the Browns competitive later in the season.

Now we have an actual scheme that even the fans can embrace. I've always liked the flow of the West Coast offense because the typical NFL game has always placed a much greater emphasis on ball control than the college version. Well executed, the West Coast offense tends to be the best combination of forward movement and clock eater. Like any other system it helps if you have great players, like Joe Montana or Steve Young, manning the controls, but its success doesn't necessarily require that high of a level of competence.

There's every reason to believe, for example, that a highly successful college player whose stock in trade is accuracy like Colt McCoy will be successful running this offense. It's how he made his bones in the first place. You need a good running game, but not necessarily a great

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one. The Browns have that covered with a competent running back in Peyton Hillis to keep things honest though for the Browns to keep Hillis healthy someone else who can do something more than gain 1/2 yard on second down will have to emerge.

The receivers too don't have to be spectacular so I'm not at the same threat level midnight about the lack of a big name in the ranks as many other fans. In my way of thinking, the only major question mark about the receiving corps in the context of this offensive scheme is Josh Cribbs. I'm just not sure yet he has anywhere near the polish to run effective routes consistently. Of slightly less importance is whether or not there is enough razz in the offense to satisfy the big ideas of a receiver like Greg Little. We'll see. I do think that Brian Robiskie is a perfect fit, finally, and that Mohamed Massaquoi showed enough last season for us to believe he too can run effective and successful routes in this offense, that is if his foot ever heals properly.

The downside ultimately to this team is its incredible lack of depth on both sides of the ball, a circumstance brought on by the serial incompetence of 10+ seasons of misfit management. This is the Achilles' heal that will tend to mask whatever real progress is being made.

So yea, it's another re-birth, another child to support but it's the Browns and this is what we do. Let's just hope we have at least a fighting chance to watch this child grow a bit older before we ever have to think about having another one again.