



Are the sportswriters in this town merely idiots or are they just reflecting the collective angst of a downtrodden fan base. In Cleveland it's sometimes hard to tell.

Browns' president Mike Holmgren made his semi-regular pilgrimage to the podium in Berea on Thursday to talk about the state of the Browns as he sees them and for his candor he's rewarded with more questions about not just what the heck he said but why. The reason I suspect is that no one takes anyone at face value.

Responding to questions about the state of negotiations with Peyton Hillis, Holmgren said they are at a standstill, which was obvious to nearly anyone who remembered that Hillis hadn't signed on to any contract extension just yet. Holmgren didn't blame Hillis or his agent and he didn't suggest that the Browns had lost interest. It's a question of value, which it always is, during contract negotiations.

Holmgren was asked about first year coach Pat Shurmur and then said what was obvious to nearly anyone who remembered that Shurmur, hired by Holmgren, is barely 5 games into his first go-round as a head coach. Surprise, Holmgren still backs Shurmur.

So when is Holmgren going to make Shurmur hire an offensive coordinator? Well, that's up to

Lingering Items--Talking Heads Edition

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Shurmur, or so said Holmgren.

And then there were the questions about Colt McCoy. Is he really "the man?" Holmgren said what was obvious to nearly anyone who remembered that McCoy is just 5 games into a new offensive scheme. Yes, McCoy is the quarterback for this year. Well then, what about next year? We'll see, won't we, or so said Holmgren. If he's not, then we'll keep looking until we find the right quarterback.

It really was that obvious and straightforward, so naturally the local writers, like Marla Ridenour at the Akron Beacon Journal, concluded that both Hillis and McCoy face uncertain futures in Cleveland. Welcome to the big leagues.

I suppose the Ridenours of the world should be forgiven for their superficial approach to a sport they probably don't quite understand. I'm talking about journalism and not football, by the way. If you're going to engage in analysis and put it out there, it helps to actually analyze and contextualize. It's easy to assume that everyone has an agenda, that things said aren't what is meant, as the way of putting a spin on what you wanted to conclude anyway, but seriously isn't the future just as uncertain for virtually any player on the Cleveland Browns? Why single out Hillis and McCoy?

Maybe Joe Thomas and Joe Haden are safe. You could probably count T.J. Ward in there as well. But take a stroll through this lineup and ask yourself who else really is safe for the next few years. And when you come to the end of that yellow brick road, maybe then you'll start to understand why a team that's been this crappy for about a hundred thousand reasons for the last 10 plus years stands just 2-3 at the moment.

The Browns' roster has improved because the drafting has improved. But the draft happens exactly once a year and unless the NFL and its other member clubs take pity on the Browns and let them choose the first 30 players in the draft in each of the next four years, the improvement in this roster to the point where the team is consistently competitive with the best teams in the league is going to be slow.

This isn't a question of counseling patience to a fan base with none. It's a reminder that what gets said has context, that's all. Is that too much to ask? Perspective.

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If there could be any mild criticism of what Holmgren had to say, it stems from his naivete about the fragile state of the psyche of this town's fans. An entire generation fans has been borne and is now midway through college and hasn't seen anything resembling the kinds of teams that their parents experienced in the early 1980s. It's one thing to tell war stories but it doesn't always translate to a younger group of fans with the attention span of a puppy and no tolerance for lousy product.

So when Holmgren, in all candor, said that the Browns would be comfortable letting Hillis enter free agency and then try to sign him, alarms went off to the sportswriters ready to pounce. Doesn't Holmgren get what Hillis means to this town? Doesn't he know that Hillis was a Madden cover boy?

There is an absence of players that the fans can identify with which fully explains why they've sunk their hooks so deep into Hillis and Josh Cribbs. But until Hillis can prove he can stay healthy (which he hasn't), why should the Browns risk tying up significant long-term dollars in the context of a hard salary cap and why should Holmgren say otherwise?

But beyond not quite being fully tapped in to the sometimes misguided thinking of this fan base, there was nothing much said by Holmgren that couldn't have been easily imagined. The problem I guess is that he had the temerity to actually say it before the writers could and thus sent them scurrying to invent another angle.

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