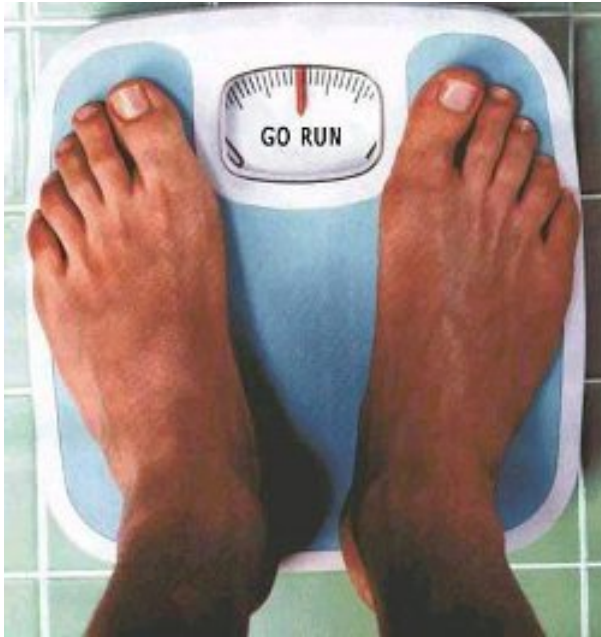


Eat Less, Exercise More

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, November 09 2011 3:00 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, November 09 2011 3:16 PM



There will come a point where Cleveland Browns fans will let a makeover take hold, mainly because they'll realize that they have no choice. Whether it's this one, the next one or the one after that is the only real question.

If the last three years, indeed the last 12 years have taught us anything, it's that there is no quick fix in the offing for this franchise. The other thing the last 12 years has taught us is that this franchise is in danger of becoming the Los Angeles Clippers of the NFL unless some time is finally given to let a plan take hold.

The theme of head coach Pat Schurmur's weekly press conference on Tuesday was, well, there wasn't a theme. Just like the weeks that preceded this there was a numbing, frustrating sameness about it.

But that's the point. The numbing, frustrating sameness is borne from an overall lack of talent on this team that at this point makes every play and every drive and eventually every game look exactly the same.

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Schurmur may have sounded almost Belichik-like (or even, shudder, Mangini-like) when he said that the team just needs to keep working. He likened it to the diet advice that no one wants to take: eat less and exercise more. Everyone is waiting for a doctor somewhere to invent a magic pill. Well guess what? So is every fan of every miserable team in every sport. It ain't happening in either case.

Maybe Schurmur was being truculent, and who could blame him, but he was speaking an inconvenient truth that no one seems to have the time and patience for. Everything about this franchise has to get better and the only way that's going to happen is through hard work coupled with patience. The franchise didn't get this bad over night and it isn't going to get significantly better over night, either. It's not a message that sells tickets today, but properly executed will sell tickets in the long run.

I don't think the wheels have fallen off this version of the franchise's latest grand plan despite the team's performance in the last few weeks in particular. To believe that they have would require the assumption of facts clearly not in evidence, like the presence of a run game, the presence of a credible receiving corps, the stoutness of an offensive line.

What's really happening is that the Browns are performing exactly as a team in this state (and also in this state) should perform. To do anything better would be a story probably more surprising than one with a headline "Kim Kardashian Quits Reality TV Forever."

There is nothing wrong with the Browns' schemes (though you can certainly question several individual plays) on either side of the ball. The team's struggles aren't a reflection of poor coaching. This team simply lacks enough talent in every phase (except kicker) to perform on anything resembling a high level for any sustained period of time.

That doesn't mean there aren't building blocks in place. There are. But as the inevitable injury bug has hit this team like it hits every NFL team at this point of the season, you really start to gain an appreciation of how important depth really is right about the time it becomes clear your team has none.

If the Browns were a new house under construction, the foundation has been built, a frame erected and the roof under cover but that's about it. Meanwhile the fans are like the impatient

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homeowners demanding to move in now. In fact they have moved in against all better judgment and are bitching because it's so cold at night and because the builders seem to make so much noise during the day and yet never seem to quite finish.

There's plenty of blame to throw around, I suppose, but how you want to dole it out very much depends on whether you look at it from a micro or a macro level and that, ultimately, is the two camps in which fans tend to fall these days.

Those operating on a micro level are hurling bricks at Colt McCoy and Shurmur at the moment, along with whatever is left over at Peyton Hillis. It's energy wasted. Those operating on a higher plane can see that little about what's happening on the field this season, good or bad, is on Shurmur, though you could put a bit more on team president Mike Holmgren and general manager Tom Heckert.

What of Holmgren? Has he really been around long enough to have made much of an impact? To a certain extent, yes. He came in halfway through Eric Mangini's first season, liked little of what he saw of Mangini then, but kept him around for another fruitless year anyway. It was the equivalent of saying "I'll start my diet a year from now." Meanwhile the patient just got fatter and clogged a few more arteries in the meantime.

For Holmgren, then, blame him for a lost season in 2010 when virtually no progress was made on any front in terms of putting in place whatever grand scheme he was conjuring.

In that context, exactly what was Heckert to do? Pretty much exactly what he did do, which was to work counter of purpose to Mangini by starting to accumulate 4-3 defensive talent and West Coast Offense type players despite the fact that neither system was in place yet.

But it's not like measurable progress was made. There are just so many holes to fill that Heckert's been like a battle field medic triaging a unit that's been decimated as it sits low in the valley with snipers around the entire perimeter. Mistakes are going to get made. The only real issue at the moment is whether or not he's been directionally correct. I think he has.

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The players that Heckert has drafted tend to be among the better performing players on this team, despite their relative inexperience. Notwithstanding the Houston game, Phil Taylor and Jabaal Sheard are the kind of players that virtually any team in the league would want. The same can be said about Joe Haden and T.J. Ward. Less certain are the long term prospects of players like Tony Pashos and Greg Little, but in those cases you can understand the thinking because neither has been awful, just raw.

I also understand the thinking about not trying to use the free agent market as a quick fix in any one area, but I don't understand it when it came to his essential obstinance in refusing to introduce any veteran presence to the receiving corps. This young and less than stellar unit could certainly benefit from the wisdom of someone with a track record, and enough of those types were available in the offseason that it makes his lack of action on this count puzzling.

The key, though, is that at this point Heckert isn't failing in obvious and dramatic fashion. It's just that the successes are hard to see given all the carnage that needs to be sifted through first. Like any significant project, it just takes time.

Perhaps the most obvious question that ought to get asked, the one hardest to answer, is why counsel patience now and not, say, when Mangini came on board? It's a fair question because all Mangini ever did was counsel the same thing Shurmur is doing now. The difference, I suppose, is that Mangini was a failed quantity with little man's syndrome and mostly just pissed people off. He was as collaborative in approach as most dictators tend to be.

In this case, the chances for success following patience seem to be more likely. There is a collaborative approach and theme in place from the team president down through the handpicked coaching staff. Unless you're completely convinced that Holmgren, Heckert and Shurmur are just never going to make it, then the only choice is patience.

This is surely not the answer most want to hear just like they don't want to hear the real prescription for losing weight. There just is no substitute at the moment so best now to accept the fact that we just need to eat less and exercise more and take solace in the notion that it's proven time and again that given time and dedication the approach will work.