

Phase One Continues for the Browns

Written by {ga=tommoore}

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The Cleveland Browns continued to get their roster in order prior to the start of free agency as they placed the franchise tag on kicker Phil Dawson on Friday.

It's the second year in a row the Browns have used the tag on Dawson, the only player remaining from the expansion squad of 1999.

While some will probably laugh that the Browns are so short on talent that the kicker is their "franchise player," it's the perfect move by the team.

As reliable as Dawson is - and think back to last season when it was a shock if he missed a kick - he is 37 and, even for a kicker, closer to the end of his career than the beginning. Why not bring him back on a year-to-year basis at this point?

If Dawson can repeat his 2011 season - when he scored a team-high 92 points by converting 24-of-29 field goals and all 20 of his extra points - the Browns can continue to work on one-year deals with him that appropriately compensate Dawson and protect the team's salary structure.

How is that a bad thing?

Dawson will make a [reported \\$3.9 million in salary this year](#), a 120 percent increase over his franchise tag salary in 2011. While some might think that is a lot of money to pay a kicker, look at the salaries of some other kickers in the league (per ESPN): St. Louis' Josh Brown (\$2.7 million), Indianapolis' Adam Vinatieri (\$2.7 million), Chicago's Robbie Gould (\$2.8 million), Tennessee's Rob Bironas (\$2.85 million) and San Francisco's David Akers (\$3 million).

Would you really take any of them over Dawson and his ability to kick in Cleveland's winter weather?

Dawson is currently in second place on the franchise's career points list with 1,155, second

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only to Hall of Famer Lou Groza's 1,349.

It's kind of amazing that, for a team that too often seems to mess things up, the Browns have a quite a history of finding successful kickers. From Groza to Don Cockroft, Matt Bahr, Matt Stover and Phil Dawson, the kicking game has more often than not been in good hands (or maybe feet?) throughout the team's history.

Now that the Browns have taken care of Dawson and [linebacker D'Qwell Jackson](#) , that just leaves the Peyton Hillis situation.

Two days after Hillis split with Kennard McGuire, his third agent change in the past year, and a day after [ESPN's Adam Schefter had an unsourced "report"](#) that Hillis told Browns coaches at the end of last season that he was thinking of retiring and possibly joining the CIA, Hillis spoke with The Plain Dealer to set the record straight.

"That's ridiculous," [Hillis told the paper](#) . "I never one time mentioned anything to any coach about retirement or joining the CIA or anything like that. It's 100 percent false. I don't know who came up with a story like that, but they should've come up with a better one to make it sound more legit."

It's a smart move by Hillis to get out his side of the story. And, since he's the only one going on the record, we lean more toward believing his side rather than Schefter's unnamed "sources."

During the past season, whenever something new would come out about Hillis - his strep throat, the Halloween party miscommunication, the supposed intervention from his teammates - we always thought it sounded more like Hillis is just immature, rather than a legitimate trouble maker.

Hillis' latest comments give us even more reason to believe that.

"Someone is trying to downplay my name," he told the newspaper. "I really don't cause a big ruckus. I pretty much keep my mouth quiet and go about my business. It was a rough year, and I expected to come out here and be prepared for free agency or whatever the case may be. Right now, to have this stuff kind of hanging over your head, especially when it's 100 percent false, it's kind of rough."

Hillis also did a pretty credible job of explaining why he's gone through three agents in the past year. In addition to McGuire, Hillis has also retained and subsequently let go Jimmy Sexton and Kelli Masters.

"My priority was to find an agent that could get a deal done with the Browns," Hillis said. "I've said all along that this was where I wanted to be, and I wanted to work with someone who had a good relationship with the Browns. We kept Kennard all year, but things weren't getting done between him and the Browns.

"Jimmy was a great agent. There was nothing wrong. (But) with the whole Madden cover thing,

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if they hadn't reached my brother (and business manager), Kyle, I probably wouldn't be on the Madden 12 cover.

"(Kelli) had a good head on her shoulders and she worked really hard for me, but we felt at the time she hadn't done too many big contracts. We felt like this was the biggest time of our lives, and we've got to make sure we had the right person going in. It was nothing against her."

While we certainly wish Hillis would just pick one person and stick with them, it sounds like he's learning. And we can't help but wonder how much having his brother involved has worked to monkey up the proceedings.

From the Browns standpoint, they have played the Hillis contract situation perfectly. While team president Mike Holmgren and general manager Tom Heckert spoke throughout the season about their desire to resign Hillis, they clearly had no intention of breaking the bank to keep him after just one good year in the league.

The team can still bring him back if they choose to. The other 31 teams in the league are reading the same stories we are and it seems unlikely that someone will step forward and offer Hillis the type of big-money contract that the Browns would pass on matching.

And if we are seeing a more mature Hillis – admittedly still a bit of an if – then we don't see any reason why the Browns wouldn't want to bring him back. Hillis is only 26 and could have three solid years still in him. He has good hands out of the backfield and can still be a solid runner. Plus Robert Griffin III is going to need someone to hand the ball to on occasion. (Oh yeah, we said it).

Most importantly, if the Browns bring him back they don't have to use salary cap space on a running back in free agency or feel the pressure to pick a running back early in the upcoming draft. They have too many other holes to fill to worry about running back this year.

We understand that after years of front office mismanagement it's hard for some Browns fans to grasp that the current regime knows what it is doing, but it's true. This is how an NFL team is supposed to work – you figure out which of your own players you want to keep and sign them, target some players that will be of high value in free agency, then nail it on draft day.

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As fun as it has been for the past few weeks with the NFL Combine and all the speculation, this part of the off season is just the *amuse-bouche*. Free agency is the appetizer and the draft is going to be the full buffet.

And we are definitely ready to chow down.

(Photo by The Plain Dealer)