

Never Building, Always Rebuilding

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Cleveland: a city where the skies are grey, the sports teams are consistently rebuilding and the front offices are always saying the same thing.

At about the exact same time that Cavaliers general manager Chris Grant was explaining why the Cavs traded away an opportunity to get into the playoffs now for an opportunity to get into the playoffs later, Browns' president Mike Holmgren and general manager Tom Heckert were offering similar reasons when explaining to season ticket holders why not doing anything now will give them a better opportunity to do something later.

The Cavs on Thursday traded Ramon Sessions to the Los Angeles Lakers in order to acquire another first round draft pick. That gives them seven first round picks over the next four years, which is less impressive than it sounds since the NBA draft is but two rounds. Still, the Cavs also have four of the first 40 picks in the next NBA draft. So to the extent that the next draft is deep, the Cavs legitimately benefit by acquiring 10% of the 40 best players available.

Of course the key is to make the correct pick at each particular slot and when you hold anything other than the first or second pick of the draft, pick a sport, it becomes more and more of a crap shoot. But putting that bit of mystery aside for the moment, the bigger story revolves around the conscious decision by Grant not to make a playoff run this season.

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Grant couched it in terms of making the best decisions for the team right now and for the future because in Cleveland the future always holds more promise than the present. Yet Grant isn't necessarily off base, as odd as that seems on the surface.

In the NBA, hell isn't reserved for those teams missing the playoffs. It's reserved for those who just make the playoffs. The bottom feeders get in the lottery. The next tier gets the few extra bucks a playoff series brings in exchange for a near perpetual invitation to the NBA's version of the Jetsons' treadmill.

The only way off that crazy thing and onto a the upper tiers where the real contenders hang out and drink Cristal while reciting lines from Party X is to spend big in free agency. The draft isn't going to be any help. But even if you're Pat Riley and notwithstanding the antics of players like LeBron James and Carmelo Anthony, spending in free agency just isn't as easy as it used to be.

The NBA's rules, further enhanced by their new collective bargaining agreement, make it far more lucrative for free agents to re-sign with their own team. The players that move tend to be on the back sides of careers and are usually a missing piece or two and not, say, a centerpiece. The problem is that these bottom run playoff teams, particularly those at the very bottom, are generally more than a missing piece away. They usually have fundamental issues.

The Cavs illustrate the point. They are only a few games out of a playoff spot right now but does anyone really think that this team could either a) do anything exciting in the playoffs or b) improve the team by ending up with a worse position in the next draft?

That's essentially the point that Grant made yesterday in talking about the Sessions trade. In language that will sound hauntingly familiar in a moment, he talked about the need to build for the future and that such building can be a slow process. It takes time to work your way through the next two or three drafts and to find the right pieces to complement what you already have.

It's a story, even if true, that we've heard over and over before.

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But in the kind of synchronicity that underscores the nature of professional sports in this town, if you had your eyes closed and just listened, Grant's words were almost word for word what Holmgren and Heckert were telling their beleaguered season ticket holders and with roughly the same effect.



The news out of the conference call getting all the run was Holmgren's furled brow and chafed backside over coming up short on moving up to the second pick of the draft so that the team could draft Robert Griffin III. Apparently Holmgren doesn't like hearing himself criticized on local radio. He felt the team made a spirited run but were done in by what was mostly an inside job between friends, you know sort of like when Bob Lamonte steers all of his clients toward the Browns and not other teams.

Holmgren's words were not without subtext. Heckert told the media a week ago that fans shouldn't get amped up like a college kid on Red Bull over the prospect of any big name free agent signings. That meant no quarterback (enjoy the sun, Matt Flynn, this generation's Kelly Holcomb) and no front line receiver. What it did mean was some spare parts, akin to the kind the Indians tend to sign in their version of free agency, who could add depth to a sport where the lack thereof all but kills any playoff chances.

I'm all for bench strength, but the Browns have a plethora of bench strength, assuming you relegate most of the current starters to the bench in favor of legitimate starters. It's something Heckert and Holmgren know but cannot say. So instead they talk about the long haul, about building methodically, about their future days in the sun and a plea again to be patient.

Truthfully, who would have expected anything different and what choice is there anyway?

That means, of course, that the Browns now have to pivot back to Colt McCoy and in a bit of damage control, Holmgren and Heckert then took to rebuilding his psyche by claiming with straight faces that they think he's just fine as a quarterback, has a high ceiling (coach speak for potential) and that if they could just get him some better players, things will be fine.

If you're starting to see a circular nature to all of this, you aren't alone. But it's that circular nature that is at the core of the entire fan experience. The only thing worse than not winning it all is winning it all. The pressure on the Green Bay Packers to repeat as Super Bowl champs was so much so that an otherwise wildly successful year, particularly if measured against any season in Cleveland, ends up mostly in disappointment and despair in Green Bay.

What keeps fans as fans is the eternal hope that things indeed will one day be better, even if fleeting. So Grant, Holmgren and Heckert mine that tract repeatedly knowing that if they can suck the fans into tomorrow, they'll still buy tickets today.

I'm not bothered by the underlying cynicism of it all because this sort of back and forth with the fans' emotions and expectations is the grist for the mill of professional sports.

But let's face it, Grant can maneuver like JLo in a Pepsi commercial but he's not going to be able to move the needle nearly as much as he'd like us to believe. In the NBA, the rebuild process is about 10 years, minimum. That seems impossible to believe given the relatively small rosters, but their entire system precludes a quick turnaround. The rewards go to the truly patient.

Once in awhile a player like James comes around and there's a chance to shorten the time frame, but even then not significantly. As much as one player should make a difference in the NBA is as much as one player rarely makes that big of difference in the NBA. That James came to the conclusion that he couldn't win a NBA title on his own sooner than Kevin Garnett and Kobe Bryant came to that conclusion underscores that fact.

You have Grant talking about taking a methodical approach over the next few years as a sort of implied promise that he'll buck historical trends and get this team in the NBA Finals sooner if not

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soon. Don't count on it. Even with clever drafting, the Cavs won't find themselves lounging in the penthouse for years.

At Cleveland Browns stadium, the odds are weirdly much better for a faster turnaround, all results of the team's operations for the last decade notwithstanding. In the NFL, teams are constantly turning at least 1/3 of their rosters a year, sometimes more as they build around a core that was created through good drafting.

It's not the system that's kept the Browns down. It's been the Browns. Too many incompetents at too many levels for too many years are the reason this team can't improve. If Heckert and Holmgren can buck that trend, then the system will reward their efforts far more quickly than the system will reward Grant and the Cavs.

That's another reason Holmgren's pursuit of Griffin is so puzzling. I understand the notion that if there's a once-in-a-lifetime player, you do all you can to grab him, which is why apparently the Browns pursued RGIII in the first place. But in truth the team is better off with actually doing what Holmgren and Heckert now seem resigned to do: surround McCoy with better talent by using all of those high draft picks they've cultivated over the last few years. It's what the system wants and what the system needs.

The only hiccup, and it's a big one, is that the Browns have so many holes to fill that there simply aren't enough high draft picks to go around. That's why the Browns being content to sign the Frostees Ruckers of the world is likewise so puzzling. The Browns don't have to sign a guy like Mario Williams and bust the cap. But they do have to do something meaningful and it will only cost them money and not their blood.

Holmgren gave his crowd one last bit of red meat to chew on and that was the notion that incremental improvement next season, like a 6-10 record for instance, is not going to be satisfactory. That sounded good, too. But until he oversees a front office that's not satisfied moving at the current snail's pace, he better start getting next year's speech ready because he'll have to explain to an even more skeptical season ticket base exactly how a 6-10 record was part of the plan all along.