



The Indians have reported to spring training and hope springs eternal after a busy and productive off season. The mood is different for Browns fans with the news that Jimmy Haslam has returned to his role as CEO of Pilot/Flying J, and I have some words of advice for the Cavs Kyrie Irving that would benefit him and help extend an exciting and productive career.

It's The Weekend Wrap...

Slow the Roll

I know what time it is.

To be more specific, I know what time of year it is. It's the time of year when pitchers and catchers report to spring training, soon to be followed by position players. It's the time of year when baseball returns to the front of our minds, and it's the time of year when thoughts of contention and "what if?" dominate our collective conscience.

I'm not going to completely step all over that. Not when my friend and colleague [Adam Burke wrote this excellent article](#)

and

[followed it up with this one](#)

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I love the optimism. More so than the optimism I also love the actual improvements the Indians have made since last season ended and I legitimately believe this team is much better than they were this time last season when guys like Aaron Cunningham and Zeke Carrera were the guys we were hoping would flourish.

The Indians have added, at significant financial expense mind you, guys like Nick Swisher, Michael Bourn, Brett Myers and Mark Reynolds. Those four guys will immediately improve this team from what it was a year ago. And it wasn't too terribly long ago when Tribe fans were looking at Asdrubal Cabrera and Chris Perez as their two tradeable assets while knowing Shin-Soo Choo would play out his final year here and then leave. Months later Cabrera and Perez are still here and Choo was dealt for, in essence, Drew Stubbs and electric pitching prospect Trevor Bauer.

We've gone from wondering whether or not the Indians had enough tradeable commodities to rebuild to wondering whether the assets the Indians acquired without deconstruction might not be able to compete this season for a playoff spot. We went from wondering just what the hell the plan was that GM Chris Antonetti had to watching it unfold and saying, "Damn!!".

And you know what? With an extra wild card having been added last season there is suddenly the possibility the Indians could compete for a post season berth.

But there are still a couple of huge "ifs" in the mix. Granted, nowhere near as many as a few months ago and nowhere near the level of hoping that Zeke Carrera would suddenly become a legit MLB player, but there are a couple big ones and they revolve around the most critical spot on the field: the mound.

I'm pretty comfortable (despite the franchise record for strikeouts that's just 8 months from being set) that the offense will be just fine. I hate strikeouts but there is validity to the fact that it's just another out and that you'll trade the potential for a K for the potential to have a hitter like Reynolds or Swisher be in scoring position the second they step into the box.

I'm also fine with the defense. Most notably, the outfield defense is improved immediately with the additions of Bourn and Stubbs and moving Michael Brantley to LF. So far so good. There will be some concern about seeing defensive stalwarts like Casey Kotchman and Jack Hannahan leave a predominantly ground-ball pitching staff behind in favor of Lonnie Chisenhall and Swisher but, again, there are tradeoffs you have to make when you're as offensively challenged as the Indians were. The infield defense will be mediocre at best but if they make the routing plays they should be fine there.

I also love the bullpen and think it's still the strength of the club, despite bullpens being extremely volatile from year to year. Having Perez, Vinnie Pestano, Joe Smith, Matt Albers and Cody Allen in the pen is reassuring. There's also some depth in the pen as guys like David Huff, Nick Hagadone, Frank Herrmann and Scott Barnes (among others) compete for major league spots.

But the starting staff is still the one area of the club that bothers me. I think spots 3-5 will work themselves out as the Indians seem to have a glut of 3rd through 5th starting candidates. Between Myers and Zach McAllister and Dice-K/Scott Kazmir/Huff/Bauer/Carlos Carrasco and others, 3-5 in the rotation will be in capable hands.

The big key is spots 1 and 2 in the rotation. To put it simply, the Indians need either Justin Masterson or Ubaldo Jimenez to be an ace and the other to be solid. Both were bad last season. And when I say bad I mean they were really difficult to watch and they did little to contribute to winning games they started.

That simply cannot be the case this season.

Not being privy to the everyday goings on in the clubhouse, I have no idea if that was all or partly on the pitchers and the coaching staff or what percentage of blame can and should be assessed to those parties. What I do know is it can't be that way this season if the Indians and their fans have any aspirations of contending in the AL.

Those "ifs" with the staff can be worked through if you're talking about about IF Carrasco can be effective a year after Tommy John surgery or IF Bauer's electric stuff translates at the big league level or IF Huff can pitch well enough to make the team and contribute or IF McAllister can build on some success last season and carry it into 2013. But you're not likely to survive a season if the top two spots in your rotation are black holes of suck.

Of the two horses I think Masterson has the best chance of getting back to where he was in terms of effectiveness. I have no way to explain that he was dominant in 2011 under Manny Acta and his staff and then was poor last season. All I can do is hope it was a blip and things snowballed and that Terry Francona and his staff can correct any issues. Jimenez, sadly, I just don't have much faith in. His velocity has been down since he was dealt here, his mechanics

change pitch by pitch and he never seemed all that willing to accept the coaching that teams have tried to give him. Maybe a couple of years of performing poorly will rattle his cage and provide the inspiration he needs but nothing we've seen from Jimenez during his tenure here thus far really makes me optimistic.

If Jimenez struggles the pressure on Masterson goes way up. That's not to say a guy like Carrasco, Bauer or someone else doesn't take off and become a dominant front of the rotation starter, but that's yet another big "if".

Don't get me wrong, I'm as excited about this 2013 Indians team as I have been about any Indians team in a long time. I'm just not quite ready to start putting together warm clothing for October baseball. There are still just too many questions that need to be answered regarding the most important position on the field.

But I am looking forward to seeing it play out.

Much Ado About Nothing...Again□□□□□□□□

I'm not at all on board with Browns owner Jimmy Haslam's hiring of Joe Banner, Mike Lombardi and Rob Chudzinski. I said I before and I'll say it again: that whole process reeked of cronyism and amateur hour.

Banner has a reputation that he earned over the last 20 years or so as an astute business man and a very smart man in general. He also has the reputation of thinking he's enough of a football man to meddle in the personnel side of the game.

That scares the crap out of me. That's bad. That's not healthy for an organization and that doesn't generate a great deal of comfort in me that the Browns are in better shape today than they were when Mike Holmgren put on a mask and robbed Randy Lerner of about \$10million per year while he added Colt McCoy AND Brandon Weeden to the roster.

When Haslam hired Banner red flags immediately went up and the hair on the back of my neck was raised.

My immediate hope was that Haslam would force upon Banner a strong-minded and capable general manager to handle the roster and lord over the draft and free agency. Someone with enough accreditation in the industry to stand up to Banner and fight for his recommendations. Someone with enough credibility to keep Banner busy on the business side doing important stuff like making sure you can get a cell signal in the stadium and maybe some wi-fi.

Instead we got Mike Lombardi.

Lombardi had basically been black-balled in the NFL for the last five years or so. When last he was employed (in any 'meaningful' way anyway) he was pretty much a 'yes-man' for the Raiders Al Davis. I'm not sure Lombardi has ever had full autonomy when it comes to personnel decisions and the picks that are at least partially attributed to Lombardi are a mixed bag of hits and misses.

Regardless of Lombardi's successes and failures in terms of the draft and personnel decisions, he's not viewed as that dominant type of personality who can command a team's war room. In fact, when hired by the Browns, Lombardi actually came across as almost apologetic for his first go round here in Cleveland under Bill Belichick and spent most of introductory press conference trying to explain his absence from the game and in justifying his own hiring.

That's not what I or many Browns were hoping for.

I don't have an issue with Chudzinski so much as with Banner and Lombardi as I do believe Chudzinski can be as successful as any other coordinator who was hired this offseason. The problem is that the Browns never talked to all of those coordinators and seemed to jump in on Chudzinski before they had to.

I can't help but think that Chud is here as much because Banner and Lombardi think he'll be easy to manipulate as because of his potential as a guy who can get the most out of a team. It

all adds up to an unholy trinity of mismatched pieces and parts who don't make each other stronger.

And Haslam is responsible for all of that and he's hitched his wagon to those particular horses for the foreseeable future. That's a big roll of the dice and we'll find out starting soon whether Banner has learned not to meddle, Lombardi has learned how to stock a roster and whether Chud is capable of leading the team. There will be nowhere for any of these guys to hide (including Haslam) when the season begins in September.

But what I'm not at all interested in at all and what I don't believe makes a bit of difference is Haslam's return to CEO of Flying J. It's a non-issue for me.

I simply don't care from where Jimmy Haslam's the team or where his office is. It doesn't matter. I never wanted or expected Haslam to spend 100 hours per week in Berea standing behind Banner and Lombardi and dictating personnel moves and I never wanted or expected Haslam to be in Chud's ear about play calling or sets or formations.

It's with all that in mind that I say I honestly don't understand the angst regarding Haslam's decision to return to his previous position as the CEO of Flying J.

Who cares?

Haslam, for better or worse, took control of the team, identified what he believed were issues and changes that needed to be made, made those changes, secured additional revenues through stadium naming rights and has now left the club in the hands of those he believes can effectively run it.

That's what owners do. At least that's what the good owners do.

We can argue all day that the choices he made weren't the right ones and I'd agree with those

who don't believe they were. But he made them and now he'll live with them. I'm not sure we want a guy who made the choices he made already working 100 hours per week on anything else related to the Browns.

I can't help but think Browns fans who bemoan the fact that Haslam has gone back to Flying J are simply mired and wallowing in self-pity generated by the last 13 years of rotten football. They want an involved owner but they don't want a Jerry Jones. They want a guy who will just shut up and write big checks but they don't want Randy Lerner.

There simply aren't a lot of owners of professional sports teams who don't have a ton of either business or philanthropic holdings that demand a large amount of time and involvement. Steve Bisciotti, owner of the World Champion Baltimore Ravens, allegedly visits Ravens headquarters no more than three times per week during the season to check in and see if he's needed, talk to his staff and to get the latest updates that concern him. And there aren't a lot of articles and angst devoted to how Bisciotti spends his time.

At the end of the day, Bisciotti leaves the Ravens in the capable hands of guys like Ozzie Newsome and his staff.

Browns fans should be less concerned about from where Jimmy Haslam checks in on the Browns, whether he be standing in Berea or on the phone from Nashville. They should be far more concerned with whom Haslam checks in.

The "where from" makes absolutely no difference. The "with whom" is what scares the hell out of me.

Strength Is His Weakness

How fun is it to watch Kyrie Irving?

I mean, how much fun and excitement is involved in watching a 20-year old kid like that take over games (and All Star events like the 3-point contest) and see a 'Cleveland' jersey on the kid?

He's a special player and a treat to watch. And yet....

I worry about the kid. I'll be paying close attention to the last 30 games or so to see how Irving holds up. Not mentally. I think the kid is tough in that regard. He has no fear and he routinely takes the ball to the basket against bigger, stronger players.

Which is my concern.

I think (and I've heard from many others that the Cavs themselves may think) that Irving needs to dedicate himself to getting stronger physically. He takes a serious beating going to the rim and will continue to do as teams go to whatever lengths needed to keep him from getting there.

I'd like to see Irving spend more time in the weight room and less time in the gym during the offseason. I think he needs to build his body up to absorb 82 games worth of punishment if he's going to become an elite player in the NBA. He may already be among the 'elite' but becoming stronger and a bit bigger might just put him at the top of the heap in terms of NBA PGs.

Irving initiates and receives a ton of contact with his style and while bulking up may not prevent injury and abuse under the basket it will make him a bit more capable of withstanding that punishment and answering the bell for the next game.

I'm not saying that Irving is fragile. He's not Daniel Gibson whose nickname should be changed from 'Boobie' to 'Coin Flip' given that guy is about 50/50 to be physically able to play on any given night. But getting bigger and stronger and taking care of his body is something Irving needs to come to consider if he's going to be a perennial All Star and have a lasting career.