

A Parallel Universe

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Just as the Indians were clinching the division last Sunday, the Browns were starting another game that reminded us all how far they still are away from championship contention. In Gary's latest, he says that there are some real parallels between where the Browns are now, and where the Indians were when they decided to start the rebuild that has now culminated in this years AL Central title.



It may have just been a coincidence that just about the time the Indians were clinching the American League Central pennant last Sunday, the Browns were kicking off against Oakland. But if you believe there are no such things as coincidence, then it's rather easy to find the parallels.

When the Browns exited the NFL after the 1995 season, there was anguish, sure, but the shiny new car in the garage was the Indians. The 1994 baseball season seemed like a cruel joke on Cleveland fans when a strike cut short any chance for the fans to celebrate the best Indians team since 1959. As that strike slowly lingered, albeit just a little, into the 1995 season, fans were itchy. But once the season finally started, the Indians played so well for so long fans were literally left with their mouths agape as the Tribe won an amazing 100 of 144 games.

Though the 1994 team set the table, it was really the 1995 team that cooked the meal, a feast that lasted during the entire Browns hiatus. It didn't make fans forget about the Browns, of course. Far from it. But it at least cushioned the blow a bit for a town that first, last and every day in between has been and will

remain a Browns town.

Those Indians teams of the last 1990s were the teams of John Hart and his up and coming protégé, Mark Shapiro. In retrospect, what is most memorable about those teams was their consistency. The Indians then weren't a one and done organization. They were built and rebuilt over seven years and remained a contender.

But as with any other sport or business, players get old, bad decisions get made, economics change. Eventually Shapiro had to make the unpopular but necessary decision to blow it all up and essentially start from scratch. In the process he found himself hamstrung by an ever-tightening budget imposed on him by owners that weren't as well capitalized as the Jacobs brothers. It forced Shapiro to make chancy trades and risky free agent signings. Some worked, some didn't. But in retrospect, what is most memorable is that at no time were the Indians uncompetitive with the rest of the league. They never sunk to the depths of the Kansas City Royals, the Pittsburgh Pirates or any of the several other dregs of either the American or National leagues.

When the Indians finally did hoist their AL Central banner last Sunday it served as a nice reminder that they are well down the road on this journey. If starting from scratch and winning the pennant were a car trip, it would be the equivalent of the ride from Cleveland to Miami, Florida. Last Sunday, the Indians arrived at the Florida border. Whether they make it all the way is unknown, of course, just as is how long they might stay this time. But they got their, again.

This only proves the point though that such a journey can be undertaken and can be successful and not everything has to go right in the interim, either. At its core, that's why fans in this Browns town are so frustrated with what they see out of their team. Most expected that the journey might take a bit longer because they

first had to actually build the car that would make the trip. But given all the advantages that the NFL has over Major League Baseball, such as a salary cap, surely we all expected to be out of West Virginia by now.

Unfortunately, this team is still somewhere on I-77, just south of Zanesville, meaning that despite the constant fiddling the Browns are still mostly remain a breather on most teams' schedules. It would be easy to recount all the mistakes that have been made, the blown draft choices, the bad signings, since 1999. But at some point what's done is done and those reference points need to be cast aside or they just morph into convenient excuses. It's a lesson GM Phil Savage first and foremost needs to learn if he is ever going to get this car pointed in the right direction and make this ball club competitive.

The constant harping and insinuations by Savage and head coach Romeo Crennel about the past and all its wrong-headedness is simply not helping. It's actually counterproductive because it continues to foster the culture he swears he's trying to change. If he truly wants to be helpful, and we'll give him the benefit of the doubt on that one, Savage should stop trying to re-invent the wheel and instead look a few miles down the road to the Indians and Shapiro for a few lessons.

If he did, he'd learn first that one of the keys to re-energizing a moribund franchise is not to entrust the day-to-day caretaking of the team to a career assistant with barely a pulse. Charlie Manuel, the quintessential old-school baseball guy, may have been a decent choice for a veteran team, but Shapiro ultimately knew and Manuel sensed, though didn't agree, that Manuel wasn't the right choice for a rebuilding project stocked with rookies. The same held true for Joel Skinner.

But in Eric Wedge, Shapiro found a nice mixture of youth, passion and an eye for

detail and just enough inexperience to realize there was still much he had to learn himself. Manuel had long been set in his ways. It was a difficult but necessary decision that ultimately helped set in motion much of what was to follow. Except for 2006, the Indians under Wedge improved every year. And given what transpired this season, 2006 looks to be a blip and not a trend.

It's hard to fathom then exactly why Savage can't see the parallels with his ballclub and act accordingly. As he goes about retooling his team and trying to get it competitive by bringing in young, promising talent, he nonetheless entrusts it to someone completely ill-suited to assist him in the task. Crennel is the quintessential old-school football guy. He may even have been a good choice for a veteran team looking for that final push. But for this team at this time he was a bad hire and remains so. It's not an accident that you'd need a microscope to see any sustained improvement since his hire.

With the Cavs making the NBA finals last year and the Indians back in the playoffs this year, Cleveland fans have had their expectation levels raised. More importantly, their b.s. meters have become more sensitive. They can spot a con and a phony and while they may not have yet concluded that Savage is either, their needles are starting to flicker. And as Savage continues to stand behind Crennel all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, it's only going to get worse.

What ultimately seems to distinguish Shapiro from Savage is that Shapiro never spent much time trying to pound square pegs into round holes. Shapiro isn't impetuous so much as he is agile. He has certain principles upon which he's built his team but isn't afraid to make adjustments. Savage, too, has a plan but is much more reticent to admit mistakes, let alone get them fixed.

Savage may be adhering to the conventional wisdom that says that hiring a new head coach would be tantamount to starting over. But the conventional wisdom isn't always right and need not be here. Assuming that it's the right hire, there's no reason that a new coach can't be one of the final pieces instead of the

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beginning of a new puzzle. Or in other words, at least get us as far as Georgia.