

Lingering Items - Leadership Edition

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What do Eric Wedge and Jack Bauer have in common? This is one of the topics Gary tackles in his latest batch of Lingering Items. All of Gary's notes this week have a common theme: leadership. He talks about Eric Wedge's command of the team, Jim Tressel's impact on the development of Terrelle Pryor, Eric Mangini's quest to find leaders for his 2009 Browns team, and Travis Hafner going back on the disabled list.



I liked [The Cleveland Fan's Jerry Roche's optimistic take](#) on the Indians and how it's still too early to consider this year as just another installment of the series "Lost";

But sometimes the problem with always looking on the bright side is that you underestimate the size of the approaching iceberg.

Whether it's too early in the season to get a full read on this team is a debatable point for which there is no right answer. What's not debatable is the number of warning signs being given off. First and foremost, as Jerry mentions, is the leadership void.

It's a little troubling when the manager admits that the players aren't completely responding to his leadership.

That's not to misstate the context of manager Eric Wedge's remarks. He was certainly talking about the inherent parenting that teammates do for each other.

Indeed, one of the reasons the Cleveland Cavaliers are such a force is their incredible team unity that stems from the overwhelming leadership provided by one of the youngest players on the team, LeBron James.

Every one on the team respects coach Mike Brown's role, but James can say things to his colleagues that Brown cannot.

It helps, too, that James holds himself to the highest of standards.

He doesn't ask more than he would expect of himself.

In that context, Wedge is absolutely correct. Still, it's rather stunning that Wedge is griping this early in the season that the players aren't much listening to him or anyone else. Actually, it's not that stunning. Look at how they're performing.

In that sense, if someone doesn't step forward soon past results will be completely indicative of future performance and fans will literally counting the days until Browns' training camp opens.

Beyond just a vast leadership void, the Indians are throwing up all sorts of other red flares left and right. The infield play has been ragged. Mark DeRosa is either having trouble adjusting to the American League or he's just not a reliable every day player. We can take the former view for now but hopefully someone in the Indians' front office is seriously considering the latter view as well.

The bullpen remains puzzling, and that's being kind. The Indians are now well into their second straight season where both Rafael Perez and Rafael Bentancort are making 2007 seem more like an anomaly.

Put it this way, if this were the Browns 2009 edition and wide receiver Braylon Edwards continued where he left off last season, no one's going to even remember his Pro Bowl season of 2007.

Perez and Bentancort are treading in the same territory.

While closer Kerry Wood has been shaky as of late, some of it clearly is

attributable to the lack of work. The Indians at the moment aren't creating a lot of save opportunities. But the one thing Wood is doing though is justifying his contract, at least when it comes to the notion that the money might have been spent better elsewhere in favor of allowing Jensen Lewis to close. All Lewis has done this year is shown that the rest of the league has caught up with him.

If he doesn't start making some adjustments soon that allow him to keep the ball in the park, he'll be joining Vinnie Chulk in mop up duty.

This season may not yet be "Lost"; but it is venturing ever closer to "24" territory with Wedge reluctantly playing the part of Jack Bauer. Nearly every game features enough intrigue and enough twists and turns that at times it seems like it's being controlled by some shadowy organization that's pulling the strings for their own profit and amusement.

Wedge hasn't set up any perimeters that I know of, at least not yet anyway, and to my knowledge hasn't used a live lamp cord and a damp rag to shock his troops into playing better. But in getting thrown out the other night, he yelled at least two seasons' worth of "dammit"; in the process. Jack would surely be proud.

This season may not be in its 24th hour just yet, but too often it does feel like torture and I'm starting to wonder loudly whether Wedge really can save the day this time. So are many others.

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If you haven't had a chance to watch the Ohio State Buckeye's spring football game, do yourself a favor and catch it the next time it is run on

The Big Ten Network. If nothing else, it provides some affirmation that within close proximity to Cleveland is a football team that's actually run competently.

The most interesting aspect of the game, of course, was the play of quarterback Terrelle Pryor. Whether by direction or instinct, probably both, Pryor threw first, ran second. It paid off. Pr
yor threw very effectively throughout.

It's clear that the game has slowed down for him as his ability to read the defense has increased.

Probably the most impressive throw came with just seconds left in the second quarter. Pryor threw deep, across the field and to the sideline to receiver Ray Small. It was crisply thrown, accurate and because of a few nifty moves by Small resulted in a touchdown.

But what the throw signaled more than anything else is that Pryor has a strong arm.

Actually, the throw signaled something far greater. Pryor absolutely made the right decision to attend Ohio State and learn under coach Jim Tressel instead of putting his future in the hands of Michigan's Rich Rodriguez.

At the end of the spring game, former Buckeye's linebacker Bobby Carpenter, playing the role of sideline reporter but not nearly as well as Erin Andrews, asked Pryor about his performance.

In addition to the usual "player speak," Pryor made it clear that he's a "quarterback who can run."

That statement couldn't have resonated any more loudly. It would be fascinating to see how Pryor would have performed in Michigan's spring game this year had he been a Wolverine.

There is no question that Rodriguez would have turned him into another Patrick White.

In that context it's hard to imagine Pryor saying that he's a quarterback who can run.

To Rodriguez, Pryor would always have been a runner who has to throw occasionally and hence a far less complete player.

Under Tressel, Pryor is developing well, though he isn't nearly a finished product. Despite some strong throws it was hard to miss his somewhat unorthodox throwing motion however. Pryor doesn't exactly short-arm the ball, but his release point seemed to be almost at shoulder level.

Even with his height (Pryor is 6'6"), low throws have a tendency to get knocked down at the line of scrimmage.

On the other hand, it could have been more an illusion than anything else. None of Pryor's passes actually did get knocked down. But it still seems like his release point should be at least at ear level. I suspect his mechanics will continue to improve.

He already seems far better than the player who finished last season.

The real question mark about this team is its youth. With the loss of so many starters it's hard to get a read on this team right now.

But with the game against Toledo being played in Cleveland, the Buckeyes have essentially 8 home games this season, which is a huge advantage.

Playing an even bigger role, though, will be the leadership Pryor is able to demonstrate.

He may only be a sophomore, but his teammates understand that Pryor is special.

He knows it, too.

If Pryor wants to live up to the hype, he'll need to be like LeBron James and Tiger Woods, two similarly gifted athletes who used those gifts as a reason to work harder, not to coast. The problem sometimes with prodigies is that they can be lazy.

When things come too easily, they tend to relax and allow lesser but harder working talents to surpass them.

I don't have a feel yet for how hard Pryor works. Tressel says Pryor is working extremely hard and there has been visible progress.

On the other hand Tressel would say that Pryor is working hard even if he felt privately that it wasn't completely accurate.

The spring game did feature a much different and far more confident Pryor.

That's clearly the result of hard work.

If he wants to be the leader of this team, and he wants to get to the level that his inherent gifts point to, he'll have to work even harder.

And if he really wants to be like James and Woods, he's going to have to work harder than anyone in the game.

They do.

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It wouldn't be a surprise if Browns head coach Eric Mangini eventually puts up a "under construction" sign outside the team's Berea complex. With all of the rebuilding that's taking place the one thing that is certain is that the 2009 version will bear little resemblance to the 2008 version. Whether that translates into more wins remains to be seen, obviously.

One of the things that happens when a team undergoes such upheaval is that, naturally, there are few leaders at the ready. The Browns have a natural leader in quarterback Brady Quinn but unless or until a commitment is made to him, it will be awfully hard, not to mention presumptuous for Quinn to take the reigns.

Shaun Rogers also is a natural leader as well.

The problem is that he and the head coach aren't exactly Facebook friends at the moment.

Like the Indians, the Browns have a leadership void at the moment.

Mangini has gotten a fair share of criticism over the number of former Jets that now within the ranks of the Browns. But part of that has to do with trying to establish a leadership structure.

These players presumably know Mangini the best.

Naturally the others will look to them as the default when tea leaves need to be read.

At least that's Mangini's hope.

The downside with salting the roster this way is that some will look at them as shills for management if not outright spies. Too many former players can breed a level of mistrust that isn't healthy either.

These former Jets will have a difficult line to straddle and their success as leaders in the early stages of the team will depend mightily on their ability to properly navigate.

To a certain extent, it's the same model former head coach Romeo Crennel utilized when he brought in players like Ted Washington and Willie McGinest. But that didn't work that well. The recurring problem under Crennel wasn't a lack of respect for him by the players or even the lack of leadership.

It was simply the fact that despite these advantages the players simply didn't respond to him.

It doesn't mean it won't work differently for Mangini, but the Browns have been down this road before and no that success isn't a foregone conclusion.

Mangini is never going to be the player-friendly coach that Crennel was, but that will probably be to his benefit more than anything else. But if he's going to be more successful than his predecessor, it will be absolutely imperative that he allow the natural leaders to emerge and do their jobs and not try to force the issue.

As Mangini's counterpart Wedge is finding out with the Indians, a team devoid of leaders is like a boat without a rudder.

It may still putter along just find but it will be an accident if it ever makes it to its destination.

The last thing this town needs is still another Browns' ship stranded on the rocks.

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Speaking of a lack of leadership on the Indians, there wasn't much fanfare about Travis Hafner going back on the disabled list. But it does lead to this week's question to ponder: How much more do you think Hafner will even play this season?