

Busting Up The Concrete

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, September 30 2009 7:00 PM -

The Cleveland Browns are a lot of things this season, but until this weekend no one would have considered them existentialists. Yet here they are offering up a variation of the classic existential question by essentially positing: can a team this bad have a controversy at any position? In his latest, Gary hits on the neverending quarterback "controversy", and coach Mangini's decision to go with Derek Anderson as the starter for Sunday's home game against the Bengals.



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So much is wrong with this team from the ownership to the leadership on the field that such transient thoughts about quarterback controversies or whether the Browns have effectively ruined the career of Brady Quinn, or Derek Anderson for that matter, seem rather trivial. Although Mangini has now replaced Quinn with Anderson for this week's game, did the announcement really make any noise?

That doesn't mean there isn't something to be learned here. As usual, there is and it is about head coach Eric Mangini. He's turned into bizarro Chris Palmer.

Remember when Ty Detmer was signed on to be Tim Couch's mentor in the fateful first season back 11 years ago? The veteran lasted all of 8 quarters until Palmer pulled the plug, essentially telling the world that the team wasn't going anywhere so it was time to give the first-round pick the experience he would need to carry him and the team into a better place a few seasons down the road.

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At the time Palmer's decision was controversial mostly because the NFL mindset then was that rookies can't play quarterback; it stunts their long-term development because failure allegedly shatters their confidence. How quaint that notion appears today, except in Cleveland. Palmer's decision didn't work out but it wasn't wrong. It didn't work out because the Browns were so bad that any quarterback who stepped on the field risked career-threatening injury, which is basically what happened with Couch. It wasn't wrong because the franchise was building and he at least was trying to establish some semblance of a foundation.

Flash forward to Sunday. Mangini, the bizarro Palmer, does almost the exact opposite. He pulled his first-round pick, albeit 3 years removed, after a mere 10 quarters to insert a more veteran (barely) quarterback who is more suited to backing up than starting.

Mangini's decision, unlike Palmer's, may turn out OK but it is wrong. Instead of admitting the scale of the rebuilding process underway, Mangini acts as if this is a minor fix that will make the structure that much more sound. Hardly. Mangini took over a franchise with no structure and the minute he puts something in place he acts like a bride furnishing her first apartment, moving the end table here and the chair there. The fans play the patient husband tolerating these little moves knowing full well that they hardly make a difference.

Getting the quarterback position settled is one of the more important elements to building a successful team in the NFL. When you consider all the reasons the Browns have been awful the last 10 years, the lack of a quarterback is among the root causes. Mangini seemed to understand that at the outset and sought to remedy it. He had the chance to draft Mark Sanchez but apparently felt that there was already enough to work with here for both the near and long term to allow him to fill what he felt were more pressing needs.

After supposedly conducting a thorough competition over the better part of two months in order to put the forms in the right place, Mangini took a jack hammer to the concrete before it was fully cured. He did this on the strength of scant

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evidence presented in 10 quarters of football played against three objectively better football teams. And with Mangini now naming Anders as the starter, the decision is about one play, Anderson's 16-yard completion on third down to Mike Furrey.

In essence, Mangini is reworking the forms and pouring a new foundation three games in, throwing away virtually everything that had accumulated to that point in favor of one meaningless first down in a game in which his team had already been vivisected by a Ravens defense that had grown bored with the ease of their conquest.

When Palmer dumped Detmer in favor of Couch, most thought it signaled panic. As much as anything else it helped grease the skids for Palmer's firing. If Palmer had made that decision today, most would probably praise the move because, well, the NFL mindset on rookie quarterbacks has changed. In some ways, Palmer was just ahead of that curve.

The opposite, however, is not true. Mangini, allegedly a veteran head coach, is the one panicking. More than just panicking he's also signaling that he can't be trusted. As ludicrous as the so-called quarterback competition in preseason was, it was important for Mangini to name as starter the one who emerged or else lose whatever credibility he was trying to build with his new team. When Mangini named Quinn as starter, it seemed like the right decision. The results of the competition were somewhat inconclusive but of the two participants most agreed that Quinn played less bad.

But those results are now apparently irrelevant in favor of 10 quarters of Quinn's work against one meaningless pass completed by Anderson. If Mangini is so easily swayed, was the so-called competition ever anything more than window dressing anyway? In actuality, what this really says is that Mangini is completely indifferent to how random he appears. In his mind he probably thinks it adds to his aura.

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The players always will put as good a face on all of this as they can because, really, they have no other choice. Existing under a petty dictatorship where every raised eyebrow and misspoken word may lighten their wallet, why on earth would they bother to have an opinion, at least publicly? Besides, for all the talk about "team" professional athletes within the same franchise are just a loosely affiliated federation of competitors. Thrown together mostly by chance they know that at any given moment they could be sitting in someone else's locker room or at home in their Lay-Z-Boy waiting for a call from their agent on where they're headed next. One player's misery may be another's opportunity.

Mangini, of course, is as free to take advantage of this built-in mindset as he is to reshuffle the deck as much as he wants. It comes with the job. Just like Randy Lerner shouldn't hamstring this franchise by adhering to decisions that were wrong just for the sake of continuity (hint, hint) Mangini shouldn't be so constrained either.

But why is it that Quinn is being castigated by Mangini in favor of a quarterback who has far more sins on his resume? Why is Mangini giving Anderson a pass for the three interceptions he threw on Sunday and crucifying Quinn for his one? Anderson came into a difficult situation during Sunday's game only if you accept the premise that the Browns had a shot to win the game in the first place. They didn't. Quinn was hamstrung with the same constraints-no running game, limited receiving corps and playing against one of the best defenses in the league-that Anderson had. The fact that Anderson entered the game with the team down 20-0 at the half hardly changed that equation.

All this talk about the quarterbacks also begs a larger question. What is Mangini doing about the overall approach to the offense? Stated differently, how safe is Brian Daboll's job? During the first week of September three teams fired their offensive coordinators: Buffalo, Tampa Bay and Kansas City. Those seemed like panic moves at the time and in truth they were.

But we're three games into the actual season and no one seems to be asking the

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rather obvious question as to how Daboll's performance could escape the scrutiny that Quinn's has gotten. If it's possible Daboll has even less qualifications to be an offensive coordinator than Mangini has to be a head coach, but maybe that's his attraction. Mangini, always the underdog, appreciates a compatriot.

Daboll never played the game as a professional and was a safety for the University of Rochester. His coaching career is likewise undistinguished. He started as a restricted volunteer at the College of William and Mary, went on to become a graduate assistant at Michigan State and then somehow landed in New England with the Patriots as a defensive assistant, whatever that means. Ultimately he spent 4 years as a receivers coach with the Patriots and 2 years as a quarterback coach with the New York Jets. In context to Mangini's very similar resume, Daboll's ascension by Mangini to full blown NFL offensive coordinator makes perfect sense.

What's fascinating to consider in all of this is that both Mangini and Daboll were given ample opportunities that they probably didn't deserve to move up the ladder while Quinn is being left to rot for having the audacity to play poorly for 10 quarters with a team as pointless and directionless as the Browns.

It may turn out that neither Quinn nor Anderson is a NFL caliber starting quarterback. But that's a question that will get answered when either or both find themselves with another team and a better chance. Given the panicked and random way this regime makes decision, that's really their only hope.

This isn't to defend or protect either Quinn or Anderson so much as it is to underscore the problems with the puppeteer pulling the strings. Ample evidence exists and it's growing daily that the puppeteer doesn't know what he's doing. Lucky for him, the one pulling his strings checked out about 5 minutes after his hiring was announced.