

13 Questions for 2013

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Sunday, December 30 2012 1:00 PM - Last Updated Sunday, December 30 2012 9:01 AM



Well, it's official. The Browns are under new management, from the owner all the way down to the head coach and, probably, most of the assistant coaches. What an unpredictable year in Cleveland professional sports this has been!

Nonetheless, we'll attempt here to foresee another 12 months into 2013 by discussing possible answers to the relevant questions of the day. So let's don our trusty "Carnac the Magnificent" turban and take a look inside the envelopes:

1) Where do the Browns go from here?

Anyone who's worked for corporations whose ownership changes hands knows the cold, hard truth: There's no way in the world to avert a complete housecleaning, especially when huge egos are involved. Guys like Jimmy Haslam and Joe Banner want to move forward with "their guys," usually right away. It's a fact of life in the business world, and—with a price tag of \$1 billion—the Brownies are definitely a business.

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Head coach Pat Shurmur had to go. But the decision to jettison general manager Tom Heckert is not a good omen. Banner could interview hundreds of candidates and not find a better GM. Lest we forget, football is a team sport, and the danger is that no competent candidates will accept a job where they have to bow to a dictatorial CEO every day. So I'm guessing that Banner's ultimate choices will be surprises. Which, in my mind, rules out long-rumored replacements like Mike Lombardi, Josh McDaniels, Nick Saban and Jon Gruden.

2) What about inconsistent rookie quarterback Brandon Weeden?

Weeden might survive the initial purge, even if Banner—who has been mum on the subject—is not in his corner. A factor in his favor is that no QB upgrade is immediately available, unless the front office can work some kind of a deal for someone else's second-stringer. (We can only pray it's not Michael Vick.)

Thankfully, we're finally getting rid of the archaic, useless West Coast offense. Maybe we'll get a chance to see how Weeden can handle a *real* offense. If he is still around in July, and if the new head coach puts him in an offense that takes advantage of his obvious strengths and skillset, Weeden has the potential to be much better than he's shown so far. I give him three chances in four of starting the season opener in September.

3) How will all the new Tribesmen do?

A Chris Antonetti basher from way back, I've got to give him loads of credit. He's been a miracle worker so far this off-season.

Outfielder Nick Swisher, first-baseman Mark Reynolds and outfielder Drew Stubbs solidify some real soft spots in last summer's lineup. Away from Yankee Stadium's short right-field fence, Swisher's power numbers might suffer a little, but he'll still be good for a .250 BA and .775-.790 OPS. Reynolds doesn't really hit for much of an average, but his career .800 OPS is better than most of last year's starting lineup. Stubbs isn't an upgrade over last year's centerfielder Michael Brantley, but he's a significant upgrade over last year's stinky left-field crew.

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Pitching is still a huge question mark. With a bevy of new hurlers (not all of whom will make the active roster), the staff will be improved. It can't possibly be any worse than 2012—can it?

4) Who will be the Indians' Opening Day starter on the mound?

Let's see. At this moment in history, Justin Masterson has the inside track. But this Trevor Bauer guy is intriguing, and if he struts his stuff in spring training, he could be a dark horse. Give Masterson two chances in three and Bauer the remaining one in three. Carlos Carrasco, coming off major surgery, is a long, long, long, long shot. (Of course, with the growing possibility that Antonetti isn't done dealing, there's a chance that the Opening Day starter isn't even on the roster yet.)

5) Which of the Cavs will not return for the 2013-2014 season?

Some of the slots will depend upon whom the Cavs draft. But based on playing time to date, it appears that Jon Leuer and Kevin Jones will likely be outta here. (If they aren't, can anyone really say that the Cavs are in the process of upgrading the roster?)

Samardo Samuels, Jeremy Pargo, Omri Casspi and Luke Walton might be in jeopardy. C.J. Miles is likely to stay, but only if he keeps up his hot shooting.

Alonzo Gee, Daniel Gibson and Tristan Thompson are almost certain to return, although Booby may be trade bait. Kyrie Irving, Dion Waiters and Tyler Zeller are rock-solid keepers. Andy Varejao? Well, who really knows? Which leads us to the next question...

6) Will the Cavs trade Varejao before the end of the current season?

Barring injury, if Wild Thang isn't gone before the end of the season, he will be gone before or during the college draft. Two reasons: (1) he's at the pinnacle of his value on the open market; (2) he doesn't figure in the Cavs' plans two or three years down the road when Irving, Waiters

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and Zeller come of age and contend for the playoffs.

I would love to see Andy end his career here, but from a longer-term strategic standpoint, trading him for a young stud or a first-round draft choice is the smart thing to do. (Cop-out counter-argument: Does the Dan Gilbert front office always do "the smart thing"?)

7) Will Varejao be named to the NBA All-Star team?

As I wrote in an earlier post, if he doesn't, there's something very, very wrong with the league. But he's currently only ninth in the fan voting for Eastern Conference front-court players.

8) What kind of impact will new manager Terry Francona have on the Indians?

It looks like he's already had an impact. It's apparent that he signed his contract with the stipulation that the team upgrade its roster, and Antonetti is holding up his end of the deal. This has been the Indians' most active (and entertaining) off-season in years. Since there's been so much roster turnover, it'll be difficult to determine exactly how much impact Francona alone will have on the won-loss record, but it will be substantial.

9) Are the Browns' Josh Cribbs and Phil Dawson going to survive the purge and be back next season?

Both are getting up in years. But they're in different performance categories.

Clearly, Cribbs has lost at least one step to age, and it's pretty evident that the team won't suffer much by letting him walk, mainly because rookie speedster Travis Benjamin is waiting in the wings as a kick/punt returner. Dawson is another story. Despite his 38 years, he's still got leg, and he's been worth every penny of what the Browns have been paying him. As the PD's Terry Pluto has suggested, a two-year contract would not be unwise.

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However, this is a new regime, top to bottom. Cribbs is gone. So, unfortunately, is the kicker who's been the face of the franchise during the past 13 sorry seasons.

10) How many games will the Indians win this coming season?

Hard to say at this time, because rumors abound that Antonetti is not done dealing. With more than two months left before spring training camp even opens, considering the upgrades they've made to their everyday lineup, a season of 76 to 78 victories (8 to 10 more than last summer) is not out of the question. But one decent starting pitcher could net them the extra four to six games to get them to 82-82.

11) What will become of Asdrubal Cabrera and Chris Perez?

If any major-league team makes a decent offer for AsCab, he's gone. The way his career stats are already trending downward, I'm not sure the team can afford to keep him much longer.

What I'd like to see (as my pal Dave Sansone has suggested) is Perez to Detroit for Victor Martinez. The Tigers desperately need a closer, and Martinez could alternate between DH and catcher with Carlos Santana while serving as his mentor. Detroit just wouldn't go for that deal, but Perez will be gone a year from now anyway.

12) Can Tristan Thompson become the power forward monster that the Cavaliers' front office envisioned when it drafted him No. 4 in 2011?

Not in the foreseeable future—even though he's the most improved Cavalier over last season. (But he had more room for improvement than anyone else on the roster, too.)

Scoring is a major element of monsterdom. Thompson relies too much on cleaning up a couple

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offensive rebounds a game and having guards who possess the ability to drive-and-dish. Despite his natural athleticism, he's still physically awkward on the court, isn't instinctive, and lacks fundamentals. The distance from his current level of play to "power forward monster" is simply too great for any one human being to travel in the space of a couple years. He might some day be a bit more than adequate, but never a monster.

13) Will any of the Cleveland teams make the playoffs in calendar 2013?

Cavs: no way. Indians: if by some miracle they can creep up to the .500 mark, in the wide-open A.L. Central Division, who knows? A long shot at best. But I have a hunch that the Browns could be near a playoff spot by one year from now. Baltimore and Pittsburgh appear vulnerable, and the Browns' roster needs just three or four more capable starters to become a bona fide contender.

Color me eager for 2013 to unfold, if for no other reason than curiosity as to what emerges from the first Haslam/Banner off-season. And Happy New Year to all you disgusted, discouraged, but still optimistic, Browns, Cavaliers and Indians fans.