

## Lingering Items--Ownership Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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There's no real playbook for how exactly one goes about the business of actually owning a professional sports team except, of course, the requirement that you have or have access to plenty of money. But once secured, the day to day job of owning a team is mostly a blank canvas. Jimmy Haslam, the now-conflicted owner of the Cleveland Browns, apparently is still early on in feeling his way through the process and fans here are worried.

As you'll recall Haslam gave up the CEO job at His Pilot Flying J truck stop empire in favor of doing whatever it is that owners of professional sports teams do. In the few months he's actually owned the Browns, that included quite a bit of activity. He finessed Mike Holmgren out of town, he fired a general manager and hired another, he fired a coach and hired another, he met with city leaders and then, for good measure, he secured a nice little annuity for his team by selling the naming rights to its stadium for a 20 year term. It was certainly more than 6 days of work.

But having crossed off those tasks from the mental list of "to dos" that he keeps, Haslam started to realize that there wasn't much left for him to do at the moment particularly if he was going to allow the people he hired to run his football business to actually do their jobs.

So Haslam decided to push out the executive he just hired from PepsiCo to run Pilot Flying J by giving him a different role and took back his old job of CEO. It was kind of a ballsy move, actually, the kind we're not used to seeing here in Cleveland. Holmgren for example couldn't muster the courage to fire Eric Mangini and put himself in as head coach when that was all he really wanted to do. Indeed the Holmgren example is instructive.

One of the reasons Holmgren ended up being a lousy whatever the hell he was stemmed from his inability to see himself as anything other than a coach. He lacked the guts to take the job

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himself when that would have served both him and the fans far better than hiring Pat Shurmur. Holmgren thus dithered in a role he was ill suited to play, grew bored quickly and mailed in his job performance, figuratively and literally. In that sense and with that as a data point, maybe it is good that Haslam went back to what makes him happy.

But Haslam better become more sensitive to the fan base he serves. Fans here don't like finding out from the local newspaper in Knoxville, Tennessee that he's had a change of heart about how he spends his day. They wanted to hear it first hand and didn't. Haslam owed this courtesy to the Cleveland fans he expects to support his now hobby and not to the citizens of Knoxville who were just getting to know the new guy at Pilot Flying J.

As to the move itself, Haslam is adamant that nothing has changed regarding his commitment to the team, telling the Plain Dealer that "I don't think anyone would question our passion, effort, intensity or devotion to the Cleveland Browns and, candidly, to Northeast Ohio. Our family has a tremendous investment, and we want to win as bad as anybody does up there and we're going to do whatever it takes to win."

Not a bad rejoinder to those who would question his commitment but it would have been more effective if he had not referred to the fans as "anybody..up there." It probably would have been the opportune time to start referencing the collective "we" and not remind everyone that depending on the route you take, there's one possibly two states between where his team plays and where his real passion lies.

This is where we get into the whole "how exactly does one actually go about being an owner?" discussion.

In Cleveland the last two owners have had no other job beyond owning the team and I don't think anyone would hold either up as a model owner or a model for Haslam to emulate. Art Modell didn't adapt to the idle time well so he tinkered and tinkered with the team, convinced himself that he knew as much about football as anyone on the planet, and set in motion a decades long course of losing everything he built because of it. Randy Lerner on the other hand had an immense capacity for being bored perhaps the difference from Modell being the fact that at least Modell at one time in his life actually held a job. Lerner was like the Hugh Grant character in About a Boy, dividing each day into increments of frivolity in order to make his spectacularly inane existence manageable.

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I suspect that most owners in the NFL have some outside business interests that keep them busy during the down days of the NFL, meaning mid February through mid July, but on the other hand Haslam is now one of the very few owners in the NFL who has a completely separate full time job as CEO of a pretty good sized company. That role requires him to satisfy a whole host of constituents, not the least of which are family members with sizeable stakes in said company. In other words, Haslam as CEO requires a fair amount of attention to that task.

Does that mean Haslam is destined to become another crappy owner of the Browns? Not necessarily but there is pause, isn't there? By default, Haslam won't assimilate very quickly if at all in the local community. In that regard, his "up there" comment is very telling. Then there is the elephant in the room that no one is talking about—the management team he put in place to run the Browns in his absence. Fans seem relatively sold on Joe Banner as, I guess, club president or whatever he's calling himself, but are less so on Mike Lombardi who, whatever his title might be, is the guy populating the team with free agents and draft picks.

Haslam as absentee-owner (and a house in Bratenhal that he says he'll occupy once or twice a week in season doesn't make him resident) could work but at the very least the jump he made back to the family business was too soon. Fans have not had an opportunity to get comfortable with the team Haslam put in place and given all of the other similar teams put in place before them there's a pretty good chance that fans will never get comfortable with them.

I think Haslam owed it to the fans to stay the course he set out, basically promised, when he became owner. It was a bit of a bait and switch and is now another reason for fans to think that this isn't going to work out any better than anything else that's been tried. The fans may not be right, indeed they usually aren't, but it's up to Haslam to prove them wrong and right now he hasn't made much of an effort to do that.

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