



I wouldn't say that the Cleveland Browns are under siege at the moment, but that's only because they are perpetually under siege. Having spent nearly a decade and a half in a bunker will give anyone a bunker mentality. Still, all the bad press flowing from Berea these days suggests that nothing much has changed and also that the Browns really could use a better media rep.

When the story of owner Jimmy Haslam's troubles at Pilot Flying J broke, the team seemed particularly ill

prepared to understand, let alone respond to, the questions fans might have about it all such as whether this will unravel the underpinnings of Haslam's financial base and in turn throw the team into even more turmoil. That's probably a question Roger Goodell and the other owners in the NFL might want an answer to as well. And while Haslam has talked directly to the commissioner, the team's media reps haven't done a whole lot to help Haslam regain his footing with the fans. They may not know how.

If Haslam wasn't talking out of an abundance of caution given the FBI investigation and the pending litigation, fans would probably understand. But Haslam has been chatty in various other forums though he hasn't sat down for a lengthy local interview on the subject, not even with a team-friendly media type like Jim Donovan.

What Haslam has said is that he didn't really want to take attention away from the draft, but that's just a convenient excuse. The real problem here is that the Browns media department

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Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, May 23 2013 10:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 23 2013 8:18 AM

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seems poorly equipped to handle the controversy and thus has just dug themselves deeper into their bunker hoping that sooner or later the shelling has to stop. It's a strategy, I suppose, but so was the signing of Brandon Weeden.

Then came the well deserved hit piece on the team on the web site Grantland by Chuck Klosterman, a writer with local ties whose main gig now is as The Ethicist for The New York Times. Klosterman has a sense of the area having written for the Akron Beacon Journal once upon a time. In his Grantland piece Klosterman blistered the team's management for first granting and then essentially yanking supposedly unfettered access during the draft. It's not that the Browns looked petty and small during the whole incident, though they did, in spades. It's that they looked both paranoid and untethered.

Klosterman's best line about the absurdity of the Browns' approach to secrecy was the subtle, stinging "I don't think they're building chemical weapons in Berea. But they might be." Of course this could be applied to any NFL team around draft time but it's particularly telling about the Browns.

No one, I suppose, expects the Browns to lay out a week before the draft who exactly the team plans on taking with the 6th pick, but let's face it. I'm not sure anyone much cares outside of a dwindling fan base that's growing bored with the whole damn thing. The Browns have been perfectly awful at virtually every aspect of building a team for more than a decade now. I can't imagine there's a team out there that has much concern about the Browns or their strategy come draft time except in a George Kostanza-like do-the-opposite-of-what-the-Browns-do sort of way. I sense that the Browns could grant unfettered access to its draft room to not just the media but reps from every other NFL team and almost no one would show up except to try and figure out why the Browns are so bad at what they do. Now that would be an interesting inside story.

The thing about the Klosterman situation is that a team with a savvy media department could have finessed the situation, taken advantage of Klosterman's national stage and used the opportunity to show exactly why the Jimmy Haslam/Joe Banner/Rob Chudzinski regime is different than the previous iterations. Instead they bungle it to the point that if anything they look even dumber than Mike Holmgren or Phil Savage and that's saying something.

Then comes the column late last week from Pat McManamon writing on Fox Sports Ohio. McManamon has a bit of a history with the team and an axe to grind so there is that.

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McManamon used to be the Browns beat writer for the Beacon Journal and then left that to work directly for the Browns mainly writing the crap that masks for news on their web site. I'm not quite sure what happened in that relationship but McManamon hasn't been much of a fan of how the Browns run things since.

Still, McManamon's column is useful for driving home a slightly different point, that there's something indigenous to the Browns that make them media boobs. McManamon may not have been able to pinpoint the cause but how hard can that really be? This is a team that's been serially unsuccessful in any aspect of its operations. It should be in the business of embracing the fans and instead acts, at best, as if they're necessary evils to be managed.

Maybe it's as simple as the fact that the Browns rarely if ever generate any good news and thus those in the media are just being too sensitive to a team that is sick and tired of reading how lousy they are. But then I remember that great line from Don Draper in Mad Men, repeated by his mentee Peggy Olsen, that "if you don't like what they're saying about you, change the conversation."

The Browns seem utterly incapable of changing the conversation. If this new regime is really taking a significantly different approach than all of the ones in the past, how would you know? If Haslam really feels like he's got the situation at Pilot Flying J under control and that it won't come back to somehow hurt the fans in Cleveland, how would you know?

The reason the Browns are viewed with scorn and ridicule, locally and nationally, is related not just to their general incompetence but to a media approach to the fans that fosters that perception. But on the other hand why should we expect any different? A team so awful in its core business isn't suddenly going to be good in the rest of what it does.

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Maybe it isn't the Browns but the entire NFL. Word has come down from on high, meaning Commissioner Roger Goodell, that the league will be making, ahem, a few adjustments to its off season in its never ending quest to be ubiquitous 24/7/365. In particular, the draft is being moved to either an early or mid May date for 2014, at the very least. The league is still contemplating whether to start free agency a few weeks earlier. Given how much press

coverage free agency garners do you really have to guess what the final decision will be?

The league claims that the move to May next year has to do with a scheduling conflict with Radio City Music Hall and its Easter show featuring, I think, the Rockettes' re-enactment of the crucifixion. Funny how that kind of scheduling conflict hadn't emerged in the previous 8 years. It's such a ridiculous and incredible excuse that you get the feeling the league reached out to the Browns' public relations department for advice on crafting the message.

Anyone who follows the NFL with any regularity will know that the league office has been pushing to move the draft into May for years, particularly when they moved the Super Bowl into February. The league year starts in March (or used to, we'll see) followed next by the combine followed immediately thereafter by free agency then the draft and then the rookie camp and mini-camps that move seamlessly into training camp and then preseason and then regular season and then playoffs and then the Super Bowl and on and on, year after year.

The slight problem the league claimed to have in its march toward total media domination is that the combine, free agency and draft all occurred in a 4 week or so period between early March and late April. It left May without any NFL-branded activity except rookie mini-camps. And if you don't think finding stories in rookie mini-camps is a struggle then you missed all the Geno Smith is a diva articles, luckily. Pushing the draft into May is the ultimate no-brainer.

Rather than just admit the obvious the NFL strangely hid behind the shadowy scheduling conflict as if the NFL gives a damn about anyone else's schedule. Besides, last time I checked Radio City Music Hall was hardly the only venue in New York let alone the only venue nationally that could accommodate the spectacle that the draft has become.

Coaches of course are up in arms about the change because anything that infringes on their time with the players causes them angina. But the coaches hardly have a voice in anything that actually takes place in the NFL. Ask Sean Peyton.

The only problem this creates from a fan's perspective is that anything that lengthens the draft process by definition lengthens the exposure to Mel Kiper. It will beget even more mock drafts and worthless rumors and front office executives playing games with the fans about the team's draft plans as if, again, the secrecy is really masking the fact that they're making chemical

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weapons. If you think you hate the run up to the NFL draft, just wait.

Maybe the NFL is right and there is no limit to how much of the NFL fans want. It doesn't matter anyway because if there's one thing we do know about the NFL it's that it never admits a mistake. The draft will move to May unless the league can figure out how to get the Super Bowl into March. Then the draft will be in June. Suck on that, NBA.

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Of course one of the reasons that teams and leagues are so bad at managing their public relations is that they are often working with idiots. If you worked for the Indians' p.r. department tell me exactly how you'd handle Chris Perez?

When Perez had his dual meltdowns this past week, a certain segment of fans with good memories blasted him on Twitter. So Perez did what any right thinking person would do in this case. He deleted his Twitter account.

Perez has been a fairly active member of the Twitter community, usually offering his followers a song of the day or something relatively innocuous. He typically doesn't court controversy in that forum. Instead he saves it for the blow torch approach, criticizing the team and its fans directly through the media when it suits his interests.

Apparently the only one that didn't see all this coming was Perez. His approach to saving games makes Bob Wickman nervous. But despite his high wire approach he has been an effective closer except maybe to the small group of fans that accept nothing but perfection. So it

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wasn't a surprise that when Perez finally tripped those fans would pounce. Call it payback, deserved or otherwise.

What's funny about the whole thing is the way Perez handled it. Instead of letting it blow over he deleted his account and then let the Indians' public relations team issue a press release that reflected the collective sensibilities of the Indians' public relations team imagining what a guy like Perez might say if they could actually script his words, which they did in this case.

That's why we get a Perez "quote" of the likes of "we have an extremely positive and supportive group of players, coaches and staff members in our clubhouse and I want to participate in activities and routines that contribute positively to the culture we are building here." That sounds exactly what Perez would say, doesn't it?

Anyway, I guess fans won't have Perez to kick around on Twitter for the time being (who doesn't think he reactivates if/when he gets on a save streak?) but that doesn't mean he'll be less of a problem for the p.r. department. Perez will go back off the reservation. He can't help himself.

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The Cavs just "won" the NBA's draft lottery and thus this week's question to ponder: How nervous are you that Chris Grant is the Cavs' general manager?