

## The Cleveland Three

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Harken back to 2005 for a moment if you will. The Indians won 93 games and were improving each year under young skipper Eric Wedge. The Cavs were on the rise with their young superstar LeBron James and young coach Mike Brown, assistant to championship teams in San Antonio. And the Browns were applauded for bringing on the experienced Romeo Crennel to transition away from the Butch Davis mess. Now, two years later, things don't look as rosy, and that is the basis of Gary Benz's latest column.



Reading Eric Cassano's column about the field bosses running each of Cleveland's professional sports teams (see his excellent column [here](#)) served as still another wake-up call as to how quickly things can change.

Late in the summer of 2005, the Indians were emerging as the one team no one wanted to meet in the playoffs. Kudos were being given to Eric Wedge for managing the team through a slow start and but for a collapse during the last week of the season, there's a decent chance that someone other than the White Sox would have been World Series champs. Wedge was completing his second year as manager and expectations for the 2006 season were high. Wedge was subject only to the typical second-guessing of any manager but no one was seriously identifying him as the key impediment to the team's chances of returning to the playoffs.

It was also late in the summer of 2005 that Romeo Crennel was getting ready to embark on his first season as head coach of the Browns. While there were probably some that were a little skeptical of Crennel given his age, his hiring was generally greeted very favorably. Crennel had what seemed to be an impeccable resume and pedigree and the requisite connection to Cleveland. His lack of head coaching experience was noted but was not seen as any significant detriment particularly given the breadth of his experience in the league. The popular notion was that this team needed a teacher, a figure of authority and Crennel seemed to fit that description well.

It was also the summer of 2005 when Mike Brown was named head coach of the Cavs. Dan Gilbert had taken over as owner during the middle of that season and fired Paul Silas a short time later. Brendan Malone was named the interim coach. Once the season ended, Gilbert hired Mike Brown as head coach and, soon thereafter, Danny Ferry as general manager. Brown, like Crennel, had a good coaching pedigree. His lack of head coaching experience was likewise noted but, again, was not seen as a significant determinant. He was a young up and coming force leading a team of young and up and coming players.

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Yet here we are, barely into 2007, and nothing seems to have worked out as planned. The most stable coaching regime we have is Wedge with the Indians. And to most fans, it's a very shaky stability. What started as typical second guessing has now turned into essays about Wedge's perceived shortcomings. But on the other hand his job doesn't seem particularly insecure. Fans understand intuitively that General Manager Mark Shapiro is the team's auteur and Wedge is the dutiful implementer. They also understand that more than any other general manager/head coach relationship in town, Wedge and Shapiro are the most tethered. Wedge goes down when Shapiro goes down. Crennel, of course, is hanging by the barest of threads and Brown apparently finds himself somewhere in the middle.

The very tenuous nature of the Cleveland coaching situation begs the question, how did we get this way? Why is it that other franchises in other sports seem to take flyers on coaches with little or no established track record and succeed wildly? Why can newcomers like Sean Payton or Eric Mangini succeed in the NFL where seasoned veterans like Crennel fail? Why can Lawrence Frank, a virtual unknown, step into the head coaching slot with the New Jersey Nets and be successful while Mike Brown struggles to find his voice with a more talented Cavs team?

The problem is that we treat those questions as rhetorical rather than actually take on the harder task of finding the correct answers. We watch, for example, as Browns General Manager Phil Savage avoids the real problem by instead tweaking the edges, tossing some assistants to the side and brining in new ones that look disturbingly like the old ones. Savage seems to act as if he's showing great leadership and character by not abandoning an overmatched and underwhelming coach but instead getting him additional help. In the end, though, Savage is achieving the opposite result. The disarray that is apparent to everyone but Savage and owner Randy Lerner has cast a pall over this franchise that is getting increasingly harder to lift. It's to the point that no matter what happens in free agency or with the upcoming draft most fans will go into the 2007 season with a sense of dread, just as firm in the belief that no matter the players Crennel lacks the ability to put the pieces of the puzzle in the right spots.

And that same dread is now creeping in with Brown and Wedge. It may be that the two of them are suffering somewhat because of the problems with the Browns and Crennel. It's also likely that Brown and Wedge are suffering in part by unrealistic fan expectations for the teams they coach. But it's also true that objectively speaking, both Wedge and Brown haven't yet provided the same kind of spark to their teams that others, similarly situated, have brought to their teams.

Keeping this impending dread from turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy is indeed the biggest challenge the owner of all three franchises face. To this point, the jury is still out on whether any of the three understand that or, if they do, whether they have the ability to stare it down and come out on the winning side. But in the meantime, it is good to remind ourselves from time to time that the nature of sports is always cyclical. What's not going as planned this year could turn on a dime the next. To be sure, Cleveland fans have had more than their share of downward spikes, but nothing lasts forever, either. We've seen too many teams in too many sports have seen their fortunes turn quickly both bad and good. It's why they play the games in

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the first place and why, more importantly, we watch and care about the results.