

Welcome To Happy Land

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, January 26 2008 7:00 PM -

Times are pretty good for Cleveland sports. The Cavs coming off a Finals appearance, the Indians off 96 wins, and the Browns coming off 10. And for the first time maybe ever, all of the coaches and general managers of our three professional sports teams are locked up well into the future, and working together harmoniously. In Gary's latest, he takes a look at the stability in Cleveland sports right now.



Word that Browns general manager Phil Savage is in discussions with the agent of head coach Romeo Crennel for a contract extension is hardly a surprise. These discussions, coming on the heels of contract extensions given to Indians manager Eric Wedge last season and Cavs coach Mike Brown this season, seem to be the happy by-product of what happens in this town once its teams become a bit drunk with success.

But on closer examination, it appears rather doubtful that Savage, Indians general manager Mark Shapiro or Cavs general manager Danny Ferry are just giddy spendthrifts. Instead, there appears to be a deliberate intent, particularly when it comes to the Browns and the Indians, for the owners of the franchises to more directly intertwine the fates of the general managers and the coaches.

It doesn't take just a cynic to note the timing of Wedge's three-year extension last May relative to the five-year extension that Shapiro signed a few months earlier. It also didn't go unnoticed that before the talks heated up between Savage and Crennel's agent, Browns owner Randy Lerner was already talking publicly about giving Savage an extension.

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Given what appears to be the impending extensions of both Savage and Crennel, the extensions signed by Shapiro and Wedge, and the extension recently signed by Brown, gosh the only one left out in this parade has been poor Danny Ferry, the Cavs general manager. But lest anyone think that Ferry's situation is different, it's really not. Instead, there is a third element linking both Ferry and Brown-LeBron James.

Ferry's contract is set to expire in 2010, Brown's in 2011. Not coincidentally, James is signed through 2011. It may be oversimplifying to say that if Ferry can't sign James, either because James doesn't like the direction of the franchise or because he no longer likes playing for Brown, both Ferry and Brown will find themselves on the outside looking in. But it's not oversimplifying to say that Cavs owner Dan Gilbert doesn't come across as someone who would tolerate the loss of the team's key asset without exacting some penalty in return from the offending parties.

An interesting question arising out of all this is whether or not this forced symbiosis that each team is now practicing was by calculation or chance. Assuming it's not by chance, it does confirm an unmistakable trend in professional sports generally: the days when the head coach was a team's most important hire are nearly over. If anything, for most teams the emphasis is now clearly on the person acquiring the talent, not on the one managing it.

Consider, for example, the situation with the Oakland As. Billy Beane, the As' general manager, is considered something of a guru. He showed a host of mid and small market teams how to be competitive against clubs with far bigger budgets. His statistics-heavy approach has been emulated if not outright copied by a host of other general managers, including Shapiro. But one thing Beane has never seemed to have done is tie his fate to any particular manager. Beane already is on his third manager in 10 years.

The same holds true for boy wonder Theo Epstein, the Red Sox general manager. He's on his second manager. It may be that Epstein is far more pleased with

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manager Terry Francona than he ever was with Grady Little, but you get the sense that if Francona trips up, Epstein wouldn't hesitate to cut the cord. Even the New York Yankees parted ways with Joe Torre, despite years of success, while keeping general manager Brian Cashman.

There are similar examples one can easily find in both football and basketball as well, enough so that there is little doubt which way the pendulum was swung. But there is one team bucking that trend and it appears to be the model that all three Cleveland teams are following-the New England Patriots. General manager Scott Pioli and head coach Bill Belichick arrived there together in 2000 and have worked nearly seamlessly ever since in building a franchise that is consistently competitive. Whichever side you come out on the argument as to who is more responsible for the Patriots success, it is at least clear that the Patriots are a two-headed monster.

One thing that is surprising is that despite the success of the Patriots, few other teams have followed their model. Whether it's the movies, television or sports, nothing breeds repetition like someone else's success. But giving the Dolans, Lerner and Gilbert the benefit of the doubt, it's clear they have now put their franchises on the same relatively less traveled path in which the general manager and the coach either swim or sink together.

Whether or not this is a good idea is one thing. But even if it is, whether or not a team can pull it off is a whole other matter.

On the first point, a team where the general manager and head coach are working in concert is always preferable to a situation where the two parties can't get along. It's why A. J. Smith in San Diego fired Marty Schottenheimer after he went 14-2 last season. He was willing to take a step back to move forward. But that doesn't necessarily mean that the two parties have to be tied at the hip, either. In fact, there are compelling reasons against it.

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There's something to be said, for example, for maintaining hierarchy if only to keep the subordinate in line. You get the idea in New England that Belichick hardly considers Pioli his boss, which can be dangerous, but when push came to shove in New York, Torre was out of a job, which may be unfortunate for him but it will certainly keep new manager Joe Girardi in line. Whether one situation ultimately is better than the other is highly dependent on not just the talent of the people involved, including the owners, but their egos.

In the final analysis, whatever strategy is employed is still a matter of execution. If the general managers and the coaches are going to be linked as they are in New England, then it is absolutely imperative that the principles make it work in the same way. Given the relationships involved in Cleveland that seems to be the real driving force behind the extensions that have taken place. Even if you dispute the underlying premise, it is undeniable at this point that Savage and Crennel, Shapiro and Wedge, and Ferry and Brown have found a way to work together successfully with little or no friction.

Savage, for example, seems comfortable with Crennel out front. Savage may give the occasional press conference, but it's generally at rather typical junctures-pre-season; mid-year, post-season. Shapiro, on the other hand, is clearly the face of the Indians. In many ways, he's far more visible and certainly more quotable than Wedge and that doesn't seem to bother Wedge in the least. With the Cavs, both Ferry and Brown understand that it is all LeBron all the time.

Whether this will translate to ultimate success for any of these teams is far from clear, particularly when there are serious questions about the competency of some of principles. But to this point, at least, each team has had enough success that it it's hard to find too much fault with the respective owners for letting it play out just as it is for a few more years.