

## 11 Questions For 2011

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Tuesday, December 28 2010 6:00 AM - Last Updated Monday, December 27 2010 5:38 PM

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Cleveland professional sports fans have traveled a rocky road since January. The last of the potholes are nowhere in sight, neither for fans nor for the Browns, Indians or Cavaliers.

Cloudy as the future appears to be, we nonetheless attempt to dig into 11 pressing questions that will be answered in reality by December, 2011.

*The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author, and not of TheClevelandFan.com, which denies any legal responsibility for lunatic wagers placed by readers of this column. (Just thought I'd throw that in there to express my personal confidence in the following observations.)*

### 1. What will become of the Browns' coaching staff?

Talent (or lack thereof) is the problem here -- not terrible coaching.

If head coach Eric Mangini had swapped sidelines with Baltimore's John Harbaugh last Sunday, the outcome would have been the same: Baltimore 20-10, simply because the Ravens have more playmakers and a more talented overall roster. Yet Mangini remains on the hot seat. His job may well depend on whether the team's final showing against Pittsburgh leaves a good taste or a bad taste. (Which is sad.)

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Offensive coordinator Brian Daboll has had a revolving carousel of quarterbacks with varying abilities this season. He's not been given particularly adept wide receivers or depth at running back. The right side of the line is suspect, to say the least. But the fact remains that he has been less than creative, his play-calling is usually predictable, and 18.1 points per game is not what you'd call a job-saving statistic.

Defensive coordinator Rob Ryan is a high-energy, high-profile character who many observers say will be offered a head coaching job sometime between now and July. But wise executives will take one look at the Browns' defensive statistics and politely say "no thank you."

What I'd like to see happen: Keep 'em all, but upgrade the talent. What *will* happen: Team president Mike Holmgren will demand the firing of Daboll. If the final game leaves a "good taste," Mangini's chances of returning are about 60%. If the final game leaves a "bad taste," the chances fade to about 25%. Ryan follows Mangini.

### **2. Will Holmgren himself remain the Browns' president?**

Some speculate that wanderlust will draw him to the Browns' sideline to replace Mangini. Others say he might take his talents to the Big D, the City by the Bay or even the frozen tundra of Minnesota for one more chance to head-coach.

I, for one, cannot see him abandoning his job after only one year. Holmgren is in his 60s now. Chances are that his desire to coach another team to the Super Bowl has somewhat mellowed. (Been there, done that.) Chances are that his new crusade is to watch a future Super Bowl from the executive loge of a participating team. Chances are that he stays right where he is -- at least until *his* Browns make the playoffs and, in his heart, he can give himself a pat on the old back.

### **3. So, will the Browns be in the playoff hunt one year from now?**

Tough, tough question, mainly because they are in the same division as the Steelers and

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Ratbirds.

If the Browns aren't gunning for the playoffs in November, a lot of fans will be pulling out their little remaining hair by the roots. Yes, the Browns are improving. They are a more competitive team than they were a year ago. But let's face it: they still have quite a few holes to plug, and they are wildly inconsistent, playing either up or down to the competition on a weekly basis.

If GM Tom Heckert can repeat the same magic he pulled off last spring in the NFL draft (drafting three quality starters), the Browns could contend for a playoff berth. But it will be no easy task.

### **4. Can the Cavaliers come up with their first successful college draft since 2004?**

Look for the Cavs to finish the season with the third-worst record in the NBA (behind Sacramento and the L.A. Clippers). Thus, with any ping-pong-ball luck at all, they will draft third. That would put them in prime position to take forward Jared Sullinger from Ohio State.

Maybe I'm just dreaming. Sullinger is only a freshman this season, but he has plenty of NBA potential and may elect to declare for the draft early. If such is the case, the Cavaliers could do worse than to choose a superstar in the making, especially since Sullinger would be blossoming in three or four years -- the exact time frame that GM Chris Grant should target for getting the team back in the playoffs.

Unfortunately, the Cavs are in no position to settle for one quality draftee. They must hit on both (or all) choices, or their climb back to respectability will take even longer than three to four years.

### **5. Can the Indians possibly dream of a .500 season?**

The Indians are a mess. Make that Mess with a capital M. The roster is almost devoid of proven big-leaguers, and experienced leadership in the clubhouse is sorely lacking (unless the players

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take a Berlitz course in Korean during the off-season).

What needs to happen is for about three or four high-potential youngsters (like Carlos Santana, Michael Brantley, et. al.) to ratchet up their games, Grady Sizemore to return to form, and the starting rotation to settle in. Those are big "ifs."

However, the A.L. Central isn't exactly the A.L. East, competitively speaking. So, yeah, they can dream.

### **6. Will Shin Soo Choo win the Indians' Man of the Year award for the third straight year?**

Why not? Based on past performances, the only player who might challenge him is closer Chris Perez -- unless someone else comes out of nowhere and puts up some really, really, really big numbers. Over the past three seasons, Choo has been the most consistent Tribesman both at the plate and in the field. If he were playing for the Yankees or Red Sox, he'd be showing up in ads for Nike and Bud Lite.

Oh, there's Sizemore, but at this point you can flip a coin: Heads, he returns to 2007 form; Tails, he stinks on ice.

### **7. Will the Cavs be able to trade any of their players for, say, draft choices before the playoffs?**

I'm guessing no. There's simply not much desirable talent here. One of the playoff contenders might make a bid for Mo Williams (for playoff experience) or maybe Daniel Gibson (for outside shooting). Antawn Jamison is valuable to a team like the Cavs, who lack firepower, but not many playoff contenders would choose to accept his hefty contract, given this age and knees. J.J. Hickson has loads of potential, but playoff contenders are not interested in potential. Andy Varejao is -- or should be -- the only untouchable on the roster.

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Nope. When it comes to late-season trades, the Cavs will be on the outside looking in.

### 8. Which of the Cavaliers will remain after the off-season roster purge?

Varejao, for sure, unless Grant is a witless twit. Perhaps Ryan Hollins as a back-up center. Maybe Mo and Booby, unless the Cavs can get good deals in trades. Jamison is locked into a big 2011-12 contract, so no other club will bite on him.

That's five. The most the Cavs can hope to pick up via trades (surely, Hickson is also bait), the draft and free agency is four or five more. That means that at least five "end-of-bench" spots had better turnover, given the overall lack of talent that desperately needs upgrading.

Comrade Sasha Kaun, a 6-foot-11 Russian center who the Cavs hold the rights to, would be a nice addition to the active roster.

### 9. Is Colt McCoy a flash in the pan or the Browns' quarterback for years to come?

He's the Real McCoy. Take your comments about not enough arm strength and shove 'em where the sun don't shine.

### 10. Will the Browns draft offense or defense in the first round?

It won't be quarterback. It probably won't be tight end. But it *will* be an offensive player, since the team is pretty much at the bottom of the NFL heap in every important offensive category except rushing yards. We saw how bad this offense can be -- even against a terrible defense -- when it didn't even cross midfield in the second half of the Buffalo game.

It's no secret what's needed most in the first round: (1) a wide receiver who can get open; (2) a

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wide receiver who can catch the ball; (3) a wide receiver who can stretch the field.

The only other position of need that might lend itself to a high first-round draft choice is defensive end, where a hulking combo pass-rusher and run-stuffer would be orgasmic.

### 11. Who will start at third base for the Indians on Opening Day?

The Tribe will not have a third baseman. Instead, they will play two left-fielders. Trevor Crowe will be a short fielder (a la softball), Michael Brantley will stand in the shade of the Home Run Porch, and shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera will cheat toward the line.

Seriously, though, I'd like to see one of the youngsters open in the hot corner -- Cord Phelps, Lonnie Chisenhall or Jared Goedert -- rather than some warmed-over big leaguer from another team who's 42 years old and on his last legs. Or, horror of horrors, Jayson Nix or Luis Valbuena (currently one and two on the depth chart).

Is Chisenhall ready to put up better major-league numbers than either Matt LaPorta or Michael Brantley, two other minor-leaguers who were probably brought to the majors a bit prematurely? Can Phelps field the position well enough so that he doesn't give up more runs than he accounts for?

Best guess: Nix for a couple of months, Chisenhall thereafter -- hopefully for years to come.