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These days, most NFL owners approach hiring a coach the same they'd approach buying a racehorse. First, they examine the bloodlines. In the past, tracing a new coach's lineage to Bill Walsh was the fashion. Now, of course, the proper pedigree for a NFL head coach is to be a progeny of Bill Belichick.

When current Browns head coach Romeo Crennel was introduced to us, there was no shortage of touting his past association with Belichick. How many times were we told, for example, that Crennel was the defensive genius behind of all those champion New England Patriots teams? This was Crennel's calling card and his currency. Even the players constantly refer to Crennel's former job as the main reason no change should be made.

When owner Randy Lerner and General Manager Phil Savage pulled the trigger on the Crennel hiring, they were really just following the rubric followed by so many before them, including the befuddled former majority owner, Art Modell when he gave Belichick his first crack at the head sport.

And, wouldn't you know it the hiring of Crennel has worked out just about as well as Modell's hiring of Belichick. Looking back, the hiring of Belichick was really just another in a never-ending series of examples as to how things play out for Cleveland sports. Belichick, ascending to the head role slightly before he was really ready for it, proceeds to essentially alienate an entire fan base through one misstep after another. Modell, on the verge of bankruptcy (again) and worried that his idiot son wouldn't ever get the chance to personally ruin the franchise, opts for the quick dough dangled by Maryland's desperate governor and relocates the franchise. Belichick loses his job in the process and after learning the last few tricks from sensei Bill Parcells becomes, arguably, one of the greatest coaches of all time.

But there is a major difference. Whereas Belichick was young and ill-equipped to handle the job when he was first hired, he at least had an infamous work ethic even then that eventually allowed him to succeed. Crennel was one of the oldest coaches in the NFL when he was hired for the head coaching position and simply lacked the same hunger or desire to succeed.

This isn't to suggest that Crennel is ambivalent about winning or success. It's just that he's at the tail end of an already lengthy career and his need to prove himself in order to secure his upcoming future or even is legacy is simply not the same as guys like New Orleans' Sean Payton, NY Jets Eric Mangini or even Belichick himself when he was first hired. In retrospect, how could Lerner and Savage have missed this fact? And why does an increasingly passive

and disinterested mainstream media continue to ignore this story line?

When one looks at the overall portrait of these last two years the picture that emerges is that of a team being led not by a coach but by a caretaker. If the Browns were a high school class then Crennel would be the substitute teacher hired to fill in while the real teacher is on pregnancy leave. He often seems clueless about the guys in the back of the room smoking and writing on the walls.

Sure, we've all heard the players talk fondly of Crennel. But increasingly, their words seem hollow, more akin to ensuring that the principal, in the form of either Lerner or Savage, take your pick, doesn't actually go out and hire someone who might pull the plug on their shenanigans. If they truly cared for Crennel, which they don't, it would be reflected in their performance. To say that this team is bad and getting worse doesn't even begin to do justice to how out of control the situation really is.

Crennel's latest treatment of team cancer and malcontent extraordinaire Braylon Edwards shows how little control Crennel really has. We've chronicled this before but it bears repeating. Edwards was specifically told by Crennel (and fellow classmates) not to attend the Ohio State-Michigan game taking place the day before the game with the Browns chief rival, Pittsburgh. Edwards lit up anyway, taking a helicopter and arriving home late. He went unpunished. When Edwards was late for still more meetings last week, Crennel finally laid the wood to him and told him to stand in time-out for a quarter. Ouch.

Perhaps even more frustrating is the fact that Crennel won't even discuss what's obvious to most. Sure, he'll talk in generalities that some players are still a little on the wrong side of the maturity curve. But why not call out Edwards by name? Why not publicly embarrass Edwards the way Edwards continuously publicly embarrasses his coach, his teammates and the people still dumb enough to financially support this sinking endeavor?

More than likely, Crennel would simply shrug his shoulders to such questions and ask what good could come from that? The truth is a lot of good would come from it. It would show that this coach feels the same frustrations in dealing with Edwards that the fans feel. More importantly, it would be the necessary public acknowledgement that serious problems exist, a necessary prerequisite to getting them fixed. Instead, Crennel is like the alcoholic trying to convince everyone that he's only a social drinker. He remains in deep denial and leaves the rest of shaking our heads and wondering, if he hasn't reached rock bottom yet, how much further could he possibly have to go?

It still seems unlikely that Crennel will be sacrificed at season's end. Lerner and Savage appear poised to favor stability even at the expense of success. But make no mistake about it this franchise has never been less stable or further away from the ultimate prize. And another year in the hands of a substitute teacher promises only to make it that much harder for the real teacher to clean up the mess.