The NFL Draft is closing in and that can only mean one thing: Randy Lerner is talking again. In what is becoming a ritual nearly as reliable as the buzzards returning to Hinckley each spring, Browns owner Randy Lerner recently made the rounds of the local dailies by granting interviews to the Plain Dealer, the Beacon Journal and the Canton Repository. Randy had some very interesting thoughts about the current state of the team, and Gary Benz analyzes his statements in his latest.

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Cobbling together the tidbits from each interview, we've learned the following:

- If it's Lerner's call, Romeo Crennel's job is safe. Lerner told the Canton Repository that the disruption to the organization by replacing the head coach is something he couldn't even wrap his mind around. Lerner was less poetic to the Plain Dealer but no less emphatic, saying that it is not his perception that Crennel is a lame duck.

- That when Crennel and GM Phil Savage took over, the cupboard was bare and they have spent their time since trying to fill it. Lerner was at his most candid in this regard, telling the Beacon Journal that the team had maybe "five or six or seven " football players to speak of and he would leave it to debate who they were.

- Lerner believes that a team needs a core of 35 players to be successful and right now the Browns have around 18. Lerner even went so far as to name the core players, saying: “I have (Joe) Jurevicius, (Orpheus) Roye, Kellen Winslow, Braylon Edwards, Kamerion Wimbley, Sean Jones, Brodney Pool, Eric [Steinbach], Jamal Lewis, Andra Davis, Charlie Frye, D'Qwell Jackson, Leigh Bodden, Josh Cribbs for special teams certainly if not other, Steve Heiden, and emerging players like Leon Williams, Lawrence Vickers, Jerome Harrison, Travis Wilson." Actually, that’s 19, which, by Lerner’s calculation means the Browns are roughly half way toward building their roster.

- He likes the job Phil Savage is doing. He said the Browns are very focused on improving both the offensive line and defensive line and creating depth, particularly in free agency and that Savage is on track in that regard.

- He is a big Braylon Edwards fan. Lerner told the Canton Repository that it’s a misconception that Edwards is a loner and not a team guy and that Edwards is an amazing athlete and well-liked. He told the Plain Dealer that Edwards is growing and maturing as a person and, as noted above, told the Beacon Journal that Edwards is considered a core player.

- The addition of Jamal Lewis is something that can help jumpstart a change in culture from that of a franchise used to losing to one expecting to win.

- He understands the frustration of season ticket holders and suite owners and believes that the Browns obviously need to win more games and provide and environment that people will look forward to.

- Lerner has no plans on selling the team, despite his acquisition of the Aston Villa team in the English Premier Soccer League.

In many ways, the various interviews were refreshing if only for Lerner’s candor. Of course, it would be hard for him to find any sort of spin that could make his ownership to date look successful. As we noted previously, for all their success elsewhere the Lerners have been the least successful NFL owners as measured by won/loss record.

But if anyone was looking for some glimmer of hope that next season the Browns will make a miraculous turnaround, forget it. Lerner is realistic enough to acknowledge that a successful franchise needs at least 35 core players and that the Browns, even with the recent free agent signees, are still well short of that mark. Lerner also acknowledged that the upcoming draft will, at best, fill two more of those holes, still leaving the Browns well short of the talent needed to be a playoff team.

The real question all this raises is how long might it take for the Browns to get to Lerner's magic number of 35. Giving Lerner the benefit of the doubt that the Browns do have 19 such players now (and that is giving Lerner a huge benefit of the doubt, by the way), by the time they break training camp that number may have crept up to 21, assuming that they found two key players in the April draft. That puts them 14 players short of Lerner's goal. If the Browns had only 5 or 6 when Savage and Crennel took over and its taken them 3 seasons to get to 19, that means they are adding core players at the rate of, at best, five or six a year, meaning they are about 3 years away. And that's assuming that the core players they have now are still with the team and playing well 3 years from now.

In many ways, even this seems like an incredibly optimistic scenario. Adding five or six core players a year is a pretty tall order for any team. The vagaries of the free agency pool combined with the salary cap create a certain amount of player movement that is inevitable. If Lerner is right and the Browns are starting to build depth, it's also just as likely that they will lose some of that depth to free agency. In the last few years, the Browns really haven't lost anyone they wanted to retain, mainly because they simply didn't have those kinds of players on the roster. If their talent level improves, so will the chance they will lose some of it to free agency, meaning that they will have to find two players just to add one more core player to the roster.

But even more importantly, looking at Lerner's list of core players, it includes Jamal Lewis who is on a one-year contract, Kellen Winslow, who is coming off of serious surgery, Joe Jurevicius who may be lucky to be playing three years from now and Charlie Frye, whose future as a legitimate starting NFL quarterback is very iffy. It also includes a kick returner (Josh Cribbs) and a back-up tight end (Steve Heiden). It would be fun to run this list by league general managers for comment. If given anonymity, most would likely chuckle at Lerner's assessment.

Lerner admits that he hasn't been successful and feels he, more than Crennel or Savage, is

on the hot seat. He told the Plain Dealter that ownership, like coaching, is a performance-based privilege (don't tell that to the Bidwells in Arizona) and if he can't perform, why should he continue to own the Browns? It's a legitimate question as well and one that is more likely to be answered before the one about when the Browns will truly get to a competitive level.