Is Randy Lerner watching? Is Randy Lerner listening? These are the two questions Gary Benz keeps returning to after further mulling the sad state of affairs in Berea. Gary argues that Lerner has assembled a rudderless ship, a team with no clear leader or management structure. The Cleveland Browns have become a national joke that continues to provide fresh material to their audience every day and dumping their starting quarterback after only one game is just the latest gem. The only problem is that it's not particularly funny for any of us that give a damn. But is it to Lerner? Who knows?

Is Randy watching? Is Randy listening?

Those are the two questions I keep returning to after further mulling the state of the affairs in Berea with the Cleveland Browns. We've heard enough from GM Phil Savage. We've heard more than enough from head coach Romeo Crennel. What we don't know, indeed what we are kept from knowing, is whether owner Randy Lerner is watching or listening or even if he particularly cares.

It may be that Lerner was at Monday's 7 a.m. autopsy, but that's not known either. Heck, it's not known whether Lerner was even at the beat down on Sunday against Pittsburgh. And if he was at either or both, what are his thoughts? How can he allow the Lerner named to be sullied by the rank amateurs who have been given the keys to the Berea complex?

The apologists among us can nitpick Sunday's disaster all they want to unearth a positive moment or two. But doing so only misses the much larger picture. This franchise is a mess and that was before they jettisoned Charlie Frye, ostensibly the winner of a really intense and open quarterback competition as far away as possible while still keeping him in the league. Savage can let his eyebrows furl

and get all emotional about how he's sick and tired of all the negative talk. He can continue to make excuses for his befuddled and overmatched head coach. But if he was anywhere near the Stadium Sunday he bore witness to a franchise that literally hasn't moved the needle an inch since 1999.

And this isn't just an issue of putting Brady Quinn in as quarterback come Sunday or picking up a decent free agent here and there, or even getting rid of Frye. It's an issue of a franchise in such chaos and disarray from the top down that such irrelevant player moves amounts to nothing more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titantic.

It was both amusing and instructive that Crennel referred to Sunday's game as an avalanche. The exact quote was "as the game went on it was like an avalanche." It harkened back to the veritable salad days of Chris Palmer's reign of error on this franchise when he said: "Sometimes, I feel like I'm driving a runaway train. In the first two seats are the owners. In the other two seats are the personnel people, and back in the coach are the players and coaches. Everyone is yelling, 'Stop the train. Stop the train.' And you don't have time to tell them, 'Hey, we can't slow down. We've got to keep going.'"

But Palmer could be excused, to a certain extent, for having such an observation. The re-born franchise was barely two years old at the time and the league itself had as much a hand in handicapping the franchise out of the gate as did the bumbling Carmen Policy and his incompetent sidekick, Dwight Clark. The statute of limitations on those excuses have long since expired.

What's really sad in all this is how dead-on Palmer's quote still is in describing the current state of the Browns. For all of Savage's maneuverings this franchise is still a rock heading for a windshield. Listening to the quotes from the Steelers players after Sunday's game, they know it to. There was no chippiness in their demeanor. Underlying their quotes was more than a tinge of sadness and remorse for a once proud franchise and worthy adversary that is no more.

At this point, the Browns' sole purpose is to serve as the relative break for teams in an otherwise grueling NFL schedule. There isn't a player or coach from an opposing team that has any respect for this team, notwithstanding the mumbo jumbo any of them might say in a weekly pre-game conference call. And what's worse is that the Browns, under Savage and Crennel, haven't given an opposing player or coach any reason to think otherwise. In fact, everything about the disorganized and haphazard approach they took on Sunday only confirms what the opposition was thinking anyway.

And if gaining the respect of the opposition isn't high on the priority list, how about focusing then on the hapless fans that have supported this wreck for all these years? At this point is there a season ticket holder out there who isn't right now gnashing his or her teeth over the fact that they not only now have tickets they don't want, they also have tickets they can't give away, let alone sell?

Surely, the people buying the jerseys and t-shirts, tailgating in the Muni Lot, or hanging out in the bars deserve something more than they've been given since 1999. Maybe supporting a professional franchise is a sucker's bet in the first place, but without it there is no team, no league. This is, ultimately, what Lerner, Savage and Crennel just don't seem to get.

Surely Crennel isn't happy about what took place on Sunday, though with him it's hard to tell. Surely Savage isn't happy either and with him it's easier to tell. But being unhappy needs to translate into something tangible in order to change that emotion. To this point, Savage and Crennel have proven to be equally inept at turning thought into meaningful and measurable positive action.

It's true that you can't fire all the players but it's also true that you can't fire the owner, either. That's why hacks like Savage and Crennel are foisted up for sacrifice. And while that sacrifice may very well be warranted, it doesn't even come close to addressing the utter lack of direction that Lerner has failed to provide to his asset, too busy is he tooling around Europe.

That complete lack of a management structure in the front office is repeated on the field. One does follow the other. As incompetent a head coach as Crennel is, it's hard to expect any kind of planning or preparation when ownership doesn't do likewise. Ask yourself this question: who exactly is running this franchise? Good luck unearthing a credible answer to that.

Lerner is listed on the masthead and his close friend Bob Kain is listed as holding the ambiguous role of Vice Chairman. Then come three senior vice presidents, which includes Savage, and four vice presidents. Notice something missing? Who's the chairman? Who's the president? Who's the chief executive officer?

Lerner may be proud of the relative streamlined nature of his organization, but given his disconnection with the franchise, it is essentially rudderless, a ship in search of a captain and it shows, upstairs and on the field, day in, day out. As Savage continues to defend a coach completely ill-suited to his current role, it only underscores that Savage is ill-suited for his current role. And as Lerner continues to stand silent while what he owns disintegrates, it only underscores that Lerner too is ill-suited for his current role.

The Cleveland Browns have become a national joke that continues to provide fresh material to their audience every day. Permanently dumping their starting quarterback after only one game is just the latest gem. The only problem is that it's not particularly funny for any of us that give a damn, or used to anyway. But is it to Lerner? Who knows?

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