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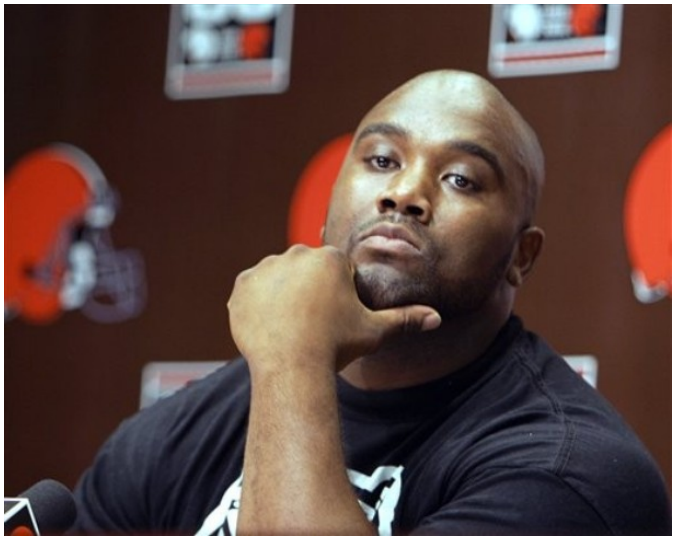

Beware the fist in the velvet glove.

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To many fans, the news that Bentley supposedly asked for and received his release probably came as a surprise. Bentley had just passed his team physical and looked poised to finally pay some sort of dividend on the Browns' heavy investment in him two years ago. On the surface, Bentley's request looks to be motivated by the numbers, as in there are too many incumbents that currently block his desire to resume his career as a starting center. Just below the surface and promising to rise soon enough are Bentley's lingering feelings that Savage hasn't quite treated him fairly. It's a complicated set of emotions with no right answer.

Bentley, of course, was Savage's first legitimate big name free agent signee. Bentley was the marquee free agent of the 2006 class and his six year $36 million contract, with $12 million guaranteed, cemented that status. In Bentley as well as Kevin Schaffer, who was signed at the same time, Savage saw an opportunity to finally improve the offensive line. Bentley was a perfect signing, really, because it involved a highly skilled lineman with a desire to return triumphantly to his home town.

It didn't work out that way because Bentley got hurt during his very first drill in his first Brown's training camp. Amazingly in a non-contact drill he suffered a torn patella that morphed into a staph infection that morphed into even more surgery. Bentley's career wasn't just in jeopardy, so too was his life.

The injury was devastating to Bentley personally and to the entire Browns organization. It set in motion a pall that hung over the 2006 training camp and started a confluence of bizarre events that ultimately resulted in Savage making a trade for Hank Fraley, who today occupies the spot that Bentley coveted upon his return.

When Bentley went down, there was no way to know at that moment how serious the injury ultimately would become let alone whether it would truly imperil Bentley's career. But as the season progressed, it became clear that Bentley was not going to be ready for the following season either. This put the Browns in a difficult spot.

Under the collective bargaining agreement, if a player is injured during the season and cannot play in the team's final game, he can be waived the next season if he is unable to pass the pre-season physical. If he's waived, he's entitled to an injury protection settlement of $250,000 but otherwise the team has no further salary obligations unless his individual contract provides otherwise. But player contracts in the NFL are never guaranteed so in Bentley's case, the Browns had an opportunity to avoid paying off the remainder of Bentley's rather large salary over the next five years by simply waiving him prior to last season.

Making a move like that on a marquee player is rare and not just because of the public relations hit. Generally, a team will put a player like Bentley who can't pass the pre-season physical on the physically unable to perform or PUP list in order to keep that player in the fold. When that occurs, the player receives his salary for that year as if he were actively playing. The reason a team puts a player on the PUP list is because they believe he will eventually recover and become a valuable player again.

As Bentley's situation progressed and the extent of his injury became clear, it's pretty obvious that Savage played a bit of poker with Bentley and his agent before last season. Knowing that Bentley couldn't pass the pre-season physical, Savage used that fact as leverage to get Bentley to re-work his contract. Bentley chose not to call Savage's bluff and instead agreed to a shortened contract, three years instead of the original six, and a salary at the league minimum of $605,000, more than double the $250,000 injury protection payment he would have received had he been waived. The Browns got out from under a large contract at a cost of an extra $350,000. Plus Savage got a bit of upside protection for the Browns if Bentley could actually return in 2008. The re-worked contract was loaded with incentives that could have pushed this year's salary to more than $4 million.

But this wasn't quite a win-win situation. Savage proved to be a shrewd and clever general manager, leaving the team with cap room by reworking a contract that would otherwise have been a burden. And while Savage arguably did Bentley a favor, it was of far lesser magnitude. Bentley got that extra $350,000 over the injury protection payment last season by agreeing to the new contract and he also got an extra year of retirement benefit credits when he sat on the PUP list last year rather than being cut. He also got the chance to further rehabilitate his knee knowing that he still had a salary coming from the Browns.

But he also got the situation that played out on Wednesday. Rolling around in his head had to be the thought that the Browns might cut him anyway and perhaps too late to really catch on with another team. That kind of move would cost him his salary of $605,000 and possibly the chance of continuing his career with another team until at least 2009. Frankly, it was a situation he couldn't risk and didn't. It's why he asked for his release.

Anyone watching Savage operate in this case shouldn't be surprised by this turn of events. When Kellen Winslow, Jr. had his motorcycle mishap that almost ended his career, Savage threatened to void Winslow's contract in order to wrangle out a more club-friendly deal. Fans may have understood that better, but the impact of that move still lingers like a rain cloud over Berea as Winslow subtly threatens to sit out if he doesn't get a new deal or at least get the benefit of his old deal.

In each case, Savage acted properly and ethically. But it won't go unnoticed, particularly by the players and that could very well sway a future free agent. Fans, egged on by team owners and general managers, get all sanctimonious when a player under contract seeks to re-negotiate forgetting what it looks like when the team basically does the same thing.

What this situation really did was provide resonance to the prophetic words that John Matuszak's character O.W. in the movie *North Dallas Forty* said to his coach after his North Dallas Bulls lost the conference championship because of a fumbled snap on an extra point "every time I call it a game you say it's a business. Every time I say it's a business, you call it a game."