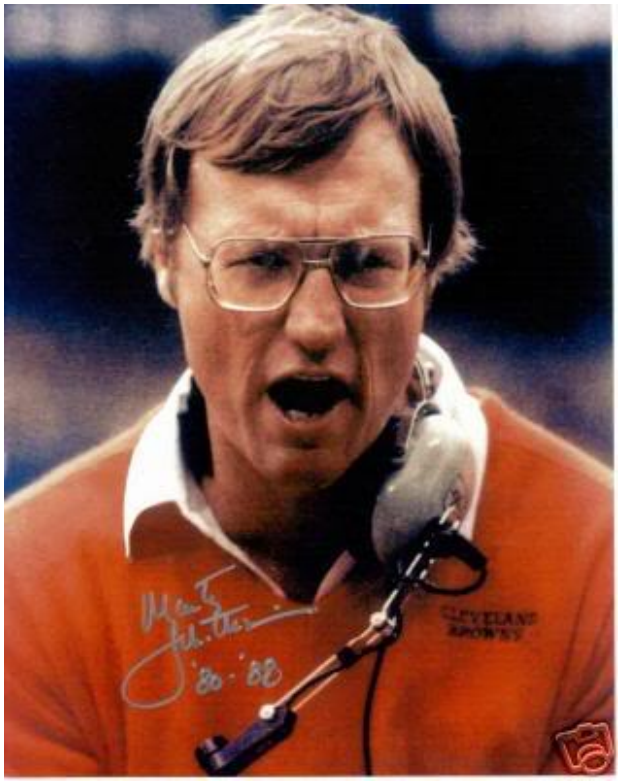
It'e been apparent since midseason that Romeo Crennel would not be coaching the Browns in 2009. The visitors to our message forums have already spent months discussing potential candidates to lead the team next season. The debate has not only centered on the specific man the Browns should hire, but also on the types of candidates who should be considered. Should we hire a coach with previous head coaching experience? Or go the route of Miami, Atlanta, and Baltimore ... all of whom are succeeding with rookie coaches. Nick Allburn takes on the topic in his latest.



There aren't many guarantees in life, but a few things are pretty safe bets. When you watch MTV, your IQ progressively dips. Any Adam Sandler comedy which isn't titled *Happy Gilmore* is probably a waste of your time. And for the better part of two months, it's been clear that Romeo Crennel would not be coaching the Cleveland Browns in 2009.

Coach Crennel's fate was essentially sealed when the Browns imploded on November 2nd against the Ravens. Instead of discussing weekly opponents and playoff possibilities ... much of the Browns chatter shifted to speculation over Crennel's replacement. The debate has not only centered on the specific man the Browns should hire, but also on the types of candidates who should be considered.

One of the fundamental questions being asked is "Should the new coach have previous head coaching experience?" The majority appear to think the answer is "yes," and many even believe that those without head

coaching experience need not apply. On the surface, it's easy to see why folks are in favor of hiring a retread to supplant Crennel.

There's a certain level of comfort that comes with bringing in an established coach. You get a name that at least garners a certain degree of respect and recognition. That is especially true of the two gentlemen most fans want to hire: Bill Cowher or Marty Schottenheimer. But there are other reasons to search among the ranks of former coaches which aren't quite so superficial.

Being an NFL head coach is a difficult job, as evidenced by their high rate of turnover. Tennessee's Jeff Fisher is the league's longest-tenured coach, having coached the Titans since 1994, when they were the Houston Oilers. That was a long time ago. Kurt Cobain committed suicide in '94, I turned 8 years old, and the Browns beat the Patriots in what remains their most recent postseason win. A long time indeed.

Consider this: beyond Fisher, Denver's Mike Shanahan and the soon-to-be-retired (we think) Mike Holmgren, no current coach had his job prior to the new millennium. In any given year, it's not unusual to see half a dozen teams in the market for a new head coach in January, and a year with double-digit coaching changes is never completely out of the question. This postseason, we'll likely see at least five changes (Browns, Chiefs, Lions, Raiders, Rams), as it appears that MikeSingletary will likely be installed as the permanent boss in San Francisco. Speculation abounds that Dick Jauron, Eric Mangini , and Wade Phillips are all possibilities for the guillotine as well, so the number of vacancies may grow. Whether If NFL stands for "not for long," then head coaches are certainly no exception.

The half full approach to all that turnover is that many exiled coaches are given second or even third chances. Recently, retreads have been all the rage. Consider the last eight head coaches to win Super Bowls (no repeats); MikeShanahan, Dick Vermeil, Brian Billick, Bill Belichick, Jon Gruden, Bill Cowher, Tony Dungy, and Tom Coughlin , respectively. Of the eight, six were on their second stint as a head man, and four of the last five were retreads. So beyond the simple fact that they were given another chance, it's probably safe to assume that head coaches learn something at each stop they make, and they adjust accordingly to make improvements when they get their next shot.

In addition to that experience, you also get a more tangible, established product

when you hire a retread. Someone who's already been a head coach has a more concrete track record than a first timer. That's a good thing when you're hiring a proven winner like aCowher or a Schottenheimer. If you're bringing in a Rod Marinelli or a Mike Nolan, not so much. With the majority of retreads, you've established a floor and ceiling. While you understand that the guy might not be the second coming of Lombardi, it's probably a safe assumption that he's not going to be BruceCoslet, either.

The problem with trying to hire a coach with a winning track record is that teams tend to retain coaches that win for an extended period of time. Plus, even if winning head coaches are available (see: Cowher, Schottenheimer), they tend to be in high demand, and they command premium dollars. Given that there's still a very real chance that even an established winner could fail in a new job, it's a serious financial risk to offer any coach the $8 to $10 million a year that someone like Bill Cowher may receive.

While experience and a proven track record are important factors that tend to tip the scales in a retread's favor, perhaps the most dynamic to consider is the difference between being a head coach and being a coordinator or position coach. It's widely accepted that there is no job which serves as a barometer for how successful a US President will be. While Ronald Reagan was a successful governor-turned-President, George W. Bush has by and large been a failure, and Bill Clinton delivered very mixed results.

In the same vein, there is no job in the NFL that serves as an ideal stepping stone to a head coaching position, not even the role of offensive or defensive coordinator. Recently, we've seen quality coordinators struggle in the transition to head coach (e.g. Romeo Crennel, Gary Kubiak), while we've seen head coaches who never were offensive or defensive coordinators blossom in their first year (e.g. John Harbaugh, Tony Sparano). There must be some reason why a coach succeeds or fails, but it doesn't appear to be solely based on his previous job description.

That is, perhaps, because the head coach's function is profoundly different than that of his subordinates. As much as he is a football coach, the head coach is also in a managerial position. Arguably the most important part of a head coach's job is assembling a quality coaching staff and delegating authority appropriately to those coaches. Most head coaches are not elbows deep in the specifics of the offensive and defensive game plans -- and if they are, then it means a

coordinatorisn't doing his job particularly well.

This may help explain why a great coordinator's specialty is often lost when he takes a head job. For example, how many offensive or defensive "gurus" have been hired, only to see the team struggle with that coach's respective area of expertise. Examples include BrianBillick with the Ravens' offense, Eric Mangini with the Jets' defense, and Marvin Lewis with the Bengals' defense. It's not that any of these coaches lost his mojo, but rather that there simply isn 't enough time for a guy to carry out his head coaches duties satisfactorily, while also serving as a surrogate coordinator to the offense or defense. We should also recognize that in many cases bad personnel can trump good coaching, and vice-versa (although this is probably less common).

Evaluation is also a crucial part of a head coach's job. Both with his subordinates and his players, the coach must be an impartial judge of whether or not a guy is getting the job done. Playing favorites and showing unflinching loyalty (read:Carthon, Maurice) can be a recipe for disaster.

One of the head coach's most visible roles is that of a motivator. As a motivator, a head coach is responsible for keeping his team focused as a whole and also dealing with players on an individual basis. When dealing with individual players, sometimes a coach has to wear different hats. Some players need some kind encouragement, while others need to have the fear of God put into them, and a coach needs to have good instincts to decide which medicine is best for a particular player. Coaches need to find effective forms of motivation that don't get stale, but theyshouldn't use the Del Rio wood chopping method if at all possible.

And of course, contemporary coaches also must play the role of a baby sitter. While coaches aren't with their players 24/7, they still need to establish discipline and a strong work ethic while the players are on the field, in the practice facility, or in the locker room. Furthermore, it must be common knowledge that team rules will be enforced for actions that take place on and (especially in the current NFL climate) off the field, and penalties for infractions should be severe enough that they are an effective deterrent. When a player decides to purify himself in the waters of LakeMinnetonka, it can't be on a boat filled with prostitutes.

Finally, the head coach's most visible role in on the sidelines as the game day coach. You could argue that this should be the easiest part of the job. Some head coaches may be inclined towards more conservative or aggressive

tendencies during the game, and those decisions will always be evaluated at least somewhat subjectively by fans and the media. Through constant communication with his coordinators, the head coach must adjust the game plan accordingly throughout the course of the game. There are also absurdly simple things like clock management and let's face it, if a coach struggles with clock management with the exception of the occasional gaffe, he never should have been considered for the position in the first place. In other words, a certain coach calling a timeout in a certain 2007 game at a certain ketchup field to decide whether or not to risk another timeout to challenge a certain play...yep, that's grounds for dismissal.

The majority of these responsibilities are drastically different than what position coaches or even coordinators experience. As a result, it's easy to see why so many successful coordinators flop when they finally get their chance in the driver's seat. It's also easy to see why many head coaches do a better job when they get their second gig. It's like just about anything else; each successive time you do something, your skills tend to improve. When you were 15 and shaving for the first time, you came out of the bathroom looking like you tried to head butt a porcupine. But as you practice more and more, you become more and more proficient. Head coach is such a unique position that rookie coaches will almost invariably make some serious mistakes that they build on in their next job. With that in mind, going after someone who already has experience in the field makes sense.

But it's also dangerous to apply a hard and fast rule to the hiring process, such as "we will only hire a coach with head coaching experience." To do so is to paint with too broad of a brush. There are certainly intriguing coaching candidates out there like JoshMcDaniels, Rex Ryan, Jim Schwartz, and Steve Spagnuolo , all of whom have been highly successful coordinators but lack head coaching experience. Likewise, there are guys out there with head coaching experience (the MartyMornhinwegs of the world) who provided more unintentional humor than the greatest smash hit holiday classic of all time , and should probably be crossed off the list before the search even begins.

The Browns haven't hired a head coach with previous experience since Nick Skorich in 1971. This, coupled with Cleveland's recent coaching failures (two pro coordinators and one college head coach with pro coordinator experience) has led many to adopt the stance that the Browns should only hire a head coach who's experienced in the field. While head coaching experience is a positive for those candidates who possess it, it is nothing more than that. Head coaching

experience cannot be viewed as the main qualifier, or perhaps more accurately, the lonedisqualifier.

What the Browns need is a talented football mind with solid managerial qualities, but unfortunately the hiring of a coach involves a high degree of intangibility, as we've established. That intangibility combined with what's riding on this decision makes the upcoming interview process a daunting task for Randy Lerner or whoever else is involved in the hiring decision. They simply can't afford to be wrong again.

Author's note: my "Heroes & Zeroes" column is likely finished for the season. I'm tired of bashing the same handful of guys each week, while heaping praise on anyone who can walk and chew gum simultaneously. Frankly, you're probably tired of reading it.