Apparently Cleveland Browns owner Randy Lerner couldn't wait for Monday to get here. According to various reports, Lerner fired Savage sometime on Sunday. In Gary's latest, he says the fact that Savage was fired before head coach Romeo Crennel speaks volumes about where Lerner is placing the blame for a season that fell apart before it ever really got started. Mr. Benz offers up his commentary on the Savage era and firing.

In the end, it was probably the email.

Cleveland Browns owner Randy Lerner likely won't discuss the details publicly, but the fact that he fired former general manager Phil Savage before Sunday's debacle against the Pittsburgh Steelers speaks volumes about how he currently feels about one of his most trusted advisors. Apparently fed up with one Savage almost deliberately sabotaging the team from the inside, from the internal squabbling to the profane email to a fan, Lerner apparently had enough and lowered the boom on Savage even before the world could take one last gander of Savage's handiwork on display at Heinz Field Sunday.

According to reports, Lerner was unhappy with Savage's communication and leadership skills. By that Lerner obviously meant that he was unhappy with Savage's lack of communication and leadership skills. It's not as if this was a new problem.

It's just that it took this season of great discontent to flesh it out.

That Savage was fired before head coach Romeo Crennel also is telling in terms of where Lerner is placing the blame for a season that fell apart before it ever really got started. Crennel's fate will come quickly enough, but the fact that Lerner is dropping the axe in this order is an indication of the greater respect he holds for Crennel than Savage at the moment.

Savage's departure brings to an end an experiment that was risky from the outset and dangerous by the end. He was plucked from the Baltimore Ravens front office, reportedly after Ravens' general manager and former Browns tight end Ozzie Newsome rebuffed Lerner's efforts to join his old franchise. Savage had had never run a franchise before but it was hoped at the time that he had learned enough at the feet of Newsome to himself become an effective general manager and return the Browns franchise to some semblance of order after the Carmen Policy/Dwight Clark years left the team in disarray.

It's funny how time and distance hasn't changed anything in that regard. Four years and 40 losses later, the franchise doesn't look any more stable than it did before Savage arrived, though I'm certain Savage has a bevy of statistics he'd cite to the contrary.

That's the problem with Savage. He was always far more comfortable with stats than people. Given almost complete power to run the franchise as he saw fit, Savage was never comfortable in a front office role, almost from the outset. At various times throughout his tenure with the Browns, Lerner had to remind Savage that he was no longer the team's chief scout and that his presence was needed in the office. Savage either never fully appreciated the counsel or ignored it in an effort to forge his own way, spending at least as much time on the road personally scouting players as he did filling out forms and playing with the pencils in Berea. In the end, this inability to assimilate into the full responsibilities of his job, particularly after winning a power struggle at the end of his first year with then Browns president John Collins, is what cost Savage his job.

This season, when a steady, mature hand was needed most, Savage was at his worst. He needlessly fought with tight end Kellen Winslow over a medical matter and then had to rescind a suspension that was never warranted in the first place. Savage's handling of the matter, both before and after, made him look small.

The national perception that the franchise had turned into a bad version of the Bronx Zoo was then cemented when Savage was outed for sending an abusive, profane email to a fan who had the temerity to suggest what was obvious to everyone but Savage-that the team was terrible. Both times, Lerner had to step in and remind Savage of who the adults in the room were supposed to be and both times Savage begrudgingly accepted the upbraiding by offering nothing more than hollow apologies without ever accepting responsibility.

An owner, particularly an absentee one like Lerner can tolerate much, but only so much. Savage sped past all lines of acceptable behavior without ever looking back.

That isn't to say that Savage didn't undertake several efforts to move the franchise forward through the draft and through free agency. But too often, it was as if Savage was doing so to bolster his Madden 2009 team instead of serving the underlying purpose of establishing a real team with a real identity. Knowing that his hand picked head coach ran a 3-4 defense, Savage continued to ignore the critical role of the linebackers and also left the team with a depleted, undermanned and overmatched secondary. Despite the acquisition of defensive linemen Shaun Rogers and Corey Williams, the defense continued in its inability to stop any team's running attack, irrespective of how slight it may have been.

On offense, Savage took over responsibility for hiring the assistant coaches after Crennel stayed too long with Maurice Carthon. It was probably the right move as was the hiring of offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski. Savage then went about rebuilding the offensive line, spending millions of Lerner's money in the process. It was a mixed bag. LeCharles Bentley suffered an unfortunate career-ending injury on the first play of training camp. On the other hand, the acquisition of Eric

Steinbach and the drafting of Joe Thomas worked well. But when Ryan Tucker was injured in the offseason, Savage never found a credible replacement and a strength of the team heading into the season was suddenly turned into just another weakness.

Savage then badly over played his hand regarding Derek Anderson. Savage grabbed Anderson from the Ravens' practice squad and gave him his first real opportunity to start.

Anderson, with a rifle arm but a fragile psyche, started strong last season and faded late.

The signs were mixed.

But instead of parlaying Anderson's one good season into additional draft picks in this year's draft, Savage instead kept him and Brady Quinn, whom Savage had acquired in another draft day deal.

As a result, another chance to build some depth was lost, a point more than underscored this season as the injuries started to pile up. To top it off, Savage rounded out his last draft with a number of "projects" most of whom never found their way into any meaningful playing time as Crennel eschewed rookies in favor of mediocre veterans in order to help save his own job.

While the drafting of Thomas and Quinn two years ago are likely to be remembered most when Savage is discussed, his signature move probably was the signing of receiver Donte Stallworth this last off season, this year's version of Andre Rison. Stallworth is a NFL vagabound who holds great promises then generally fails to deliver. He sat out the first four games of the season with a quadriceps injury suffered in pre-game warm ups and then was ineffective when he did return. It would be hard to recall a bigger bust.

The issue now facing Lerner is where he goes from here. It appears as though

New England Patriots vice president Scott Pioli is the first target in Lerner's sights. The conventional wisdom is that Pioli is ready to move on and certainly if the issue is money then Lerner is in the ball game. But Pioli, as much as anyone, is responsible for helping build and maintain one of the NFL's elite franchises and it isn't likely that Patriots' owner Robert Kraft or Patriots' head coach Bill Belichick will let him go easily.

If Pioli isn't available then it's a crapshoot. There also is the little issue of a head coach that needs to be hired. Will Lerner hire a general manager first and allow him to hire a head coach or will he instead try to find a package deal? Hard to say, but what isn't is that Lerner has already made up his mind on several things as evidenced by the fact that he couldn't even wait for the season to officially end. Now it's just a matter of waiting for the news and the rumors to dribble out. Despite another year without the playoffs, the next few weeks will be anything but quiet for the Browns and their fans.