One of the great unknowns in the Cleveland Browns' recent hiring of Eric Mangini as head coach is exactly what level of due diligence owner Randy Lerner undertook. What we do know is that by hiring Mangini now, Lerner placed far more emphasis on the importance of the head coach over the general manager. Gary Benz isn't sure that Randy Lerner had his priorities straight when replacing Romeo Crennel and Phil Savage, and talks about it in his latest piece.

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The conventional wisdom is that an opposite approach is preferred. But as Lerner made clear, at least for now, both jobs will report to him anyway so from that perspective there was no hierarchal reason to secure a general manager first.

But whatever else Lerner may have considered in hiring Mangini; the emphasis he placed on prior experience is unmistakable. It's a point he shares with many fans as well. But given several recent examples to the contrary, the question is how important is that really?

If recent NFL history tells us anything, far more critical than simply prior experience or the order in which the general manager and the coach are hired is the need for both occupants to be on the same page. Lerner seems to recognize this fact but he unnecessarily complicated matters by not giving the new general manager a say in the hiring of the head coach. If Lerner doesn't get the general manager decision right, the fact that Mangini has prior head coaching experience isn't going to amount to much.

As with almost anything else, there are statistics available to make a case for whatever you want to argue about the importance of experience in the Browns' search. If you look at the winning coach of the last 11 Super Bowls, it tends to buttress Lerner's view that experience is critical. Only two of those were coaches whose first experience came with the team they led to the championship-Brian Billick in 2001 and Bill Cowher in 2006. The rest were all veteran coaches on their second teams.

On the other hand, there is a plethora of statistics to make the counter argument. In the end, about all you can really conclude is that experience can be important but ultimately it's a crap shoot with even far less success rate than the draft. About the only way to increase your odds is to pair an experienced coach with a decent team and a competent front office and even then that may not be enough. Some people are just good coaches, most are not.

From 1997 through 2008 (a period covering 12 season) and not counting in-season interim hires (unless they became permanent), there have been 81 new head coaches hired in the NFL or, roughly, seven each year. While the perception often is that most coaches hired tend to be re-treads, the fact is that far more teams took fliers on individuals with no prior NFL head coaching experience (50 of the hires) then the other way around (31 of the hires). In fact, there have only been three seasons in the last 12 (1997, 2003, 2004) when more vacancies have been filled with former NFL head coaches than newcomers and then just barely. Conversely, in half of the years the number of new hires far outweighed the number of former coaches hired, a trend that is growing.

For example, in 1997 there were 11 new head coaches hired. Five of those coaches were first timers; six had previous head coaching experience in the NFL. In 2006, when there were 10 openings, eight of the hires were first timers, two were former head coaches. In 2007, the split was five new to two former. In 2008 all four openings were filled with first timers.

That trend appears to be continuing in 2009. The Denver Broncos just hired Josh McDaniels as their head coach, a first timer that Lerner interviewed for the Browns' opening. Every other team interviewing is likewise looking for a McDaniels type as compared to a Mangini. While Jim Schwartz had a second interview with the Detroit Lions a, no one is interviewing Marty Schottenheimer or even Brian Billick. In that sense, Lerner's hiring of Mangini is bucking a definite trend.

But far more important than just this simple trend is whether being a bit of a contrarian guarantees Lerner any greater chance of being right than say, Denver's hiring of McDaniels. Certainly Denver doesn't think so. But that doesn't mean they are right either.

Consider the two sides of the coin that the 1997 season illustrates. That season the Giants brought in newcomer Jim Fassel. Kevin Gilbride, also a newbie was hired by San Diego and as was Steve Mariucci when hired to replace a retiring George Seifert (who unretired a few years later). Fassel lasted the longest, seven seasons. He won 58, lost 53 and had one NFC championship. Mariucci lasted six seasons and had a winning record in four of those seasons. His Achilles' Heel was the playoffs. Gilbride was simply a bust.

But those owners that hired experienced coaches hardly fared much better. Dan Reeves, who had been fired earlier that season by the Giants, took over in Atlanta and lasted 7 seasons. He hit his high water mark in his second season with Atlanta, advancing to the Super Bowl. The next 5 seasons were mostly a bust and by the time he was fired, the Falcons were 3-10. Bruce Coslet fared no better in Cincinnati than in Oakland. Peter Carroll lasted only one season in New

England before abandoning the pro ranks. Joe Bugel was equally bad in Oakland as he was in Phoenix. Bobby Ross had some success in San Diego but had none in Detroit. In fact, the only real success story was Dick Vermeil, who returned after a 15 year absence, lasted 3 seasons with the St. Louis Rams before retiring with a Super Bowl ring. On the other hand, he couldn't find that success with Kansas City a few years later.

You can pretty much find similar results in every other season as well.

But far more fascinating than all of that is the simple fact that whether teams hired newcomers or veterans, the attrition rates are similar and awful. If you discount coaches who retired, nearly every coach hired from 1997 through 2005 has already been fired, some more quickly than others. Here's the list of coaches who quit or were fired from those seasons: Dan Reeves, Bruce Coslet, Bobby Ross, Jim Fassel, Pete Carroll, Mike Ditka, Joe Bugel, Kevin Gilbride, Steve Mariucci (twice), Wade Phillips, Chan Gailey, Jim Mora (Sr. and Jr.), Jon Gruden, Brian Billick, Dick Jauron, Ray Rhodes, Gunther Cunningham, Mike Riley, Chris Palmer, Dave Campo, Mike Sherman, Al Groh, Dave Wannstedt, Jim Haslett, Gregg Williams, Dick LeBeau, Butch Davis, Marty Mornhinweg, Marty Schottenheimer (twice), Mike Tice, Bill Callahan, Steve Spurrier, Dennis Erickson, Denny Green, Mike Mularkey, Norv Turner, Romeo Crennel, Nick Saban, and Mike Nolan.

Here's the far more modest list of coaches that remain active with the same team: Andy Reid, Mike Holmgren (retired at the end of this season), Bill Belichick, John Fox, Tony Dungy (retired at the end of this season), Jon Gruden (at Tampa Bay after being fired from Oakland), Marvin Lewis, Jack Del Rio, Lovie Smith, and Tom Coughlin.

If you want to throw in the 2006 season, you can add four more to the fired list: Rod Marinelli, Mangini, Art Shell and Scott Linehan. And for good measure, throw in the name of Cam Cameron, who was fired last year after one season in Miami.

When you look at the list of the 10 head coaches still active with the same team that were hired between 1997-2005, they break evenly into newcomers and veterans. Here, though, is at least where you can make a little more of a case for hiring experience. None of the newcomers on that list has yet to win a Super Bowl whereas each of the veterans has.

Whether any of this bodes well for Mangini is hard to say. Certainly recent examples like Belichick, Gruden, Coughlin, Dungy, and Holmgren proved that it can be worthwhile to give a former coach a second chance. On the other hand, there are more veteran coaches in that same time period that have failed, such as Reeves, Ross, Coslet, Ditka, Schottenheimer, Rhodes and Green, to name a few. Likewise, there are some good examples of newcomers that have been successes, even without winning a Super Bowl, but far more that have been failures.

The one common thread of each veteran that has been successful is that he's done it with a team that already had some talent and a competent front office (although in the case of Holmgren, he essentially became the front office for several of those years). Each franchise had already experienced some level of success already and in each case the veteran coach came in and was able to push the team over the top. In each case (excluding Holmgren) also was critical in hiring the new coach. Conversely, for those who failed, they tended to fail with lousy teams with lousy front offices anyway. It mattered little who hired the coach. Indeed, the same conclusions are generally applicable to the newcomers as well.

This trend doesn't bode well for the Browns at the moment. It is a team with some talent but not nearly enough. There is no front office and the one that was in place was far from competent. In other words, there is much work to do and a fan base with the patience of a puppy.

Mangini might be a terrific coach whose experience is invaluable. McDaniels may be the next Belichick. Ultimately, though, it may not matter who Lerner hired. Unless he can find the right person at the top to put this humpty-dumpty of a team

back together the right way, any head coach is already well on his way to becoming just another discarded egg shell.