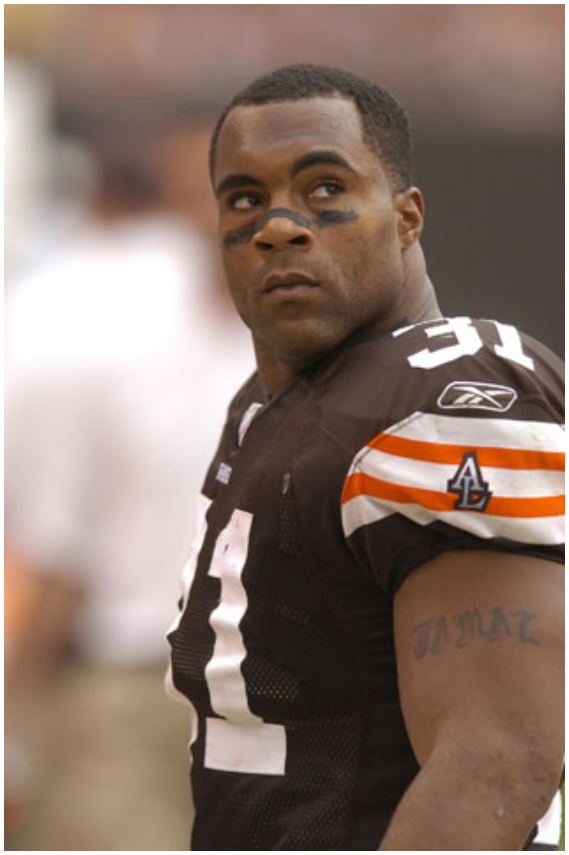
Being on the cusp of another Browns' season beginning makes Mansfield Lucas start to think about the recent past. Not with frustration, disappointment or anything like that. It makes him think about success and failure; in the NFL, in sports, in any walk of life. It really comes down to one thing: decisions. And Eric Mangini has made a lot of them in this, his first summer as head coach of the Cleveland Browns. Mansfield looks at what Mangini has done with this team in his latest piece for us.



Being on the cusp of another Browns' season beginning makes me start to think about the recent past. Not with frustration, disappointment or anything like that. It makes me think about success and failure; in the NFL, in sports, in any walk of life. It really comes down to one thing: decisions. Make more good ones than bad ones and over time things take care of themselves. Make many more good ones than bad and you have a real shot at doing something special. Of course, the polar opposite holds true as well. Personally, I think the dumbest thing fans say or write on boards is when they dismiss decisions as "luck" or shrug off evaluating bad decisions as nothing more than "20 / 20 hindsight". Fact is decisions begat outcomes and outcomes are synonymous with results. In other words, for example, there is causal connection between who a team drafts and about how many games they win. And this stems from who is hired as GM and coach. And so on.

All of this has me looking at the roster decisions Coach Mangini and GM Kokinis made last week through the lens of 10 seasons of The Browns: The Next Generation ™. Look, the decision of playing cloak and dagger with the starting quarterback means less than nothing. The real issue is who they choose to start, why, and how the rest of the team is built. There were several interesting decisions as far as I'm, concerned. They have one thing in common, and that is the refreshingly distinct lack of a discernable agenda. It really appears to me that they tried to keep the best players possible as they deem them "best". Let me give some examples. When Randy Lerner made his first poor decision, granting Butch Davis the absolute power that would make Louis the 14th blush with envy, Butch's agenda was to keep his guys; his draft picks. He manufactured a salary cap crisis, jettisoned any vet who got in his way, and handed his draft picks not only roster spots, but also starting jobs. Phil Savage arrived and his agenda was to purge the roster and rebuild from the ground up as if he were in an expansion situation, dismiss the importance of a coaching-centric environment that emphasizes accountability, and hope to arrive at success by accruing enough talent through a scouting process. Much like Davis, it seemed his picks got priority in roster and lien-up decisions although the veteran accommodations he allowed Romeo were bizarre anomalies. It was almost as though there were token veteran quotas Romeo was allowed in hopes he could instill his culture. But the main point is I could easily see agenda-based patterns that seemed to trump simple logic when it came to keeping and playing the best players. And those bad decisions led to profound consequences.

There is perhaps no more worse decision in Browns V 2.0 history than the following. No, it wasn't drafting Couch, Brown, Warren, or even Jeremiah Pharms. It wasn't drafting anyone, not even a long-snapper. It wasn't hiring or firing a coach or coordinator. It wasn't signing a free agent. It was a bad roster move based on bad evaluation. In 2002, Coach Davis was disappointed by the lack of a physical presence at center. Dave Wollabaugh had been a free agent signing for the expansion team, and was more of a cerebral, finesse player rather than the road grader desire in the smash mouth AFC North. This resulted in Jeff Faine being drafted 21st overall the year after a center was selected

on day one in Mel Fowler. For whatever reasons, Faine was deemed by the next guy, Savage, to not be, um, physical enough or healthy enough. So he broke the bank by making a center one of the highest paid lineman in NFL history and absorbed a huge cap hit, dealing away Faine to be a solid starter on a far better offense. We all know how LeCharles Bentley was star-crossed, and after two seasons of a guy a lot like Wollabaugh, Coach Mangini passed on playmakers, sorely needed defensive help, even a franchise quarterback prospect for, you guessed it, another freaking center. For those at home keeping score, that's two of the team's last six number one picks spent on centers, another 3rd rounder, and the highest paid free agent in club history. Most teams develop and start day two talent at this position. Most teams have never even drafted a center in round one. That means we've drafted a running back in round one only once, no defensive backs, and just one sorta-kinda linebacker 'tweener athlete on a team that lacks playmaking talent at the top of the roster. We drafted the same number of pass rushing ends in round one as centers. Why? Because a bad decision was made when Butch Davis ignored this guy who was a low profile hold over from the previous staff. Now you want to tell me that the same Ernie Acorsi who bothered to scout the USFL, pulled off the Kosar supplemental heist, drafted Ernest Byner in now defunct round 10, and built the Super Bowl Giants got purely lucky? I'll scoff. Good decision for Ernie, dumb decision by Butch, and one that has caused the organization to suffer enormous opportunity cost. The long-sought after physical presence at center was here and ignored all along.

Why do I harp on this? *Because Shaun O'Hara never got a fair shake here, else he would have shown up as the player he became in New York.* Chris Palmer

played him some as a rookie and spoke highly of him, but hey, every guy who has been here since Dwight Clark and Palmer just knew the previous guys were blithering morons and the roster was devoid of any talent. Right? Their egos and political circumstances told them so, and it crafted their decisions. And the Kool Aid drinking sycophants gave those snake oil salesmen a pass for spewing this BS that a complete roster rebuild was required and they had to wait patiently for years. Until Mangini.

Let's start with the running back situation. In this case, it looks like the new guys may have stumbled upon something good. Now I don't see in James Davis what some do to invoke his namesake Terrell, but he seems to have some speed and instincts and likes to actually hit a hole. Mangini keeps him. But he also wisely gives Jamal Lewis the benefit of the doubt and keeps him starting so as not to alienate everyone by disrespecting the veteran team leader. He's also patient with Jerome Harrison, not one of "his guys" despite injuries. Meanwhile, "his guy" that he signed, Noah Herron, fails to make the squad. I can't find any agenda here.

The story is almost identical in the defensive backfield. Veterans that Mangini brought in himself are let go while the holdovers start, other veterans stick, and a guy like Mike Adams isn't casually overlooked and arrogantly discarded as was Cris Crocker. Needless holes have not been created that then

simply must be refilled at the cost of other opportunities. The same holds consistent at linebacker and just about every other position grouping .
David Patten is getting on with his life, not taking the place of Willie McGinest. You will see mixtures of plenty of Savage players, some Jets sprinkled in perhaps, young up and comers Mangini selected, and a new few vets in support. No, it isn't the 1948 Browns roster, but I look at the cuts and I am hard pressed to say that the best 53 guys aren't with them or that the

taxi squad
guys don't make sense. Parenthetically, a huge test will come when David Bowens is healthy. Will Alex Hall be allowed to continue to build upon what he's shown thus far, or will the familiar vet be handed a job in the manner the previous coach might have done?

Why does all of this matter? All of the previous guys who ran the show since Palmer and Clark loved excuses. Butch Davis and Phil Savage never met a rationalization they didn't play up like a politician. They never, ever, passed up an opportunity to blame the previous staff for perceived talent issues, and loved to spend time creating voids only to have to fill them. Mangini and Kokinas aren't doing that. What about K2 you say? I say why is Bellichick a genius with Seymour and Mangini an idiot with Winslow? This matters because I'm not seeing Mangini take the tack of a full-blown rebuild. What I'm seeing is evaluation and use of what he has, additions according to a profile and need, and an insistence on moving forward and not

looking back. Sure, he's not perfect. I think the strategic decision that will blow up in his face will be the opportunity cost trading down only to stock up on wide receivers at the expense of safeties, offensive tackles, and linebackers, linebackers, linebackers. As much as Braylon Edwards drives people nuts, it is clear to me that he is the solitary preeminent offensive athletic talent on this football team at a playmaking position. You build on that. You don't get prematurely frustrated and run it away. Besides, there is no comparison to Braylon's missteps and what you see in a Plexico, Dig-Dug, or real head case like that. Braylon isn't the guy I gravitate toward on 3rd and 6, but you can best believe I want him around. Josh Cribbs also heard opportunity knock and seized the in-person call with a pit bull-like bite. Sure, some like to take cheap shots at how eager-to-believe fans embrace him like he's Jim Thorpe. But for a guy who never ran a route until three years ago he's learning on his own timeframe and he is finally progressing well. You get than man involved in a short passing game and he's a hybrid. He almost plays with the physicality of another tight end, but the skills of a receiver. He's young, but I also admit to giving up on Cribbs playing a three down starting offensive position. However, unless there is a strategic plan already in play to let Edwards go come free agency, it will be difficult to supplant these two who, on-paper, complement each other nicely. Meanwhile, there is a chasm at safety, the right tackle is iffy, and we have no playmaking linebackers in a 3 - 4, and two second round receivers sit on the bench. It is going to be a bitter pill to swallow watching our "pass rush" while Brian Orakpo wins NFL Defensive Rookie of the year.

Anyway, I have no idea what to expect this September and October. Because of that, you're not going to see me attempt a traditional season preview prognostication. I don't think things will start well for us against the Vikings and I believe this is a bad matchup for the Browns rushing defense, but I need four to six games to form an opinion. I'm sticking in the 5 to 8 game win band until I see more. But what I have seen remains consistent: rational decision making based on a plan. That's a real good place to start.