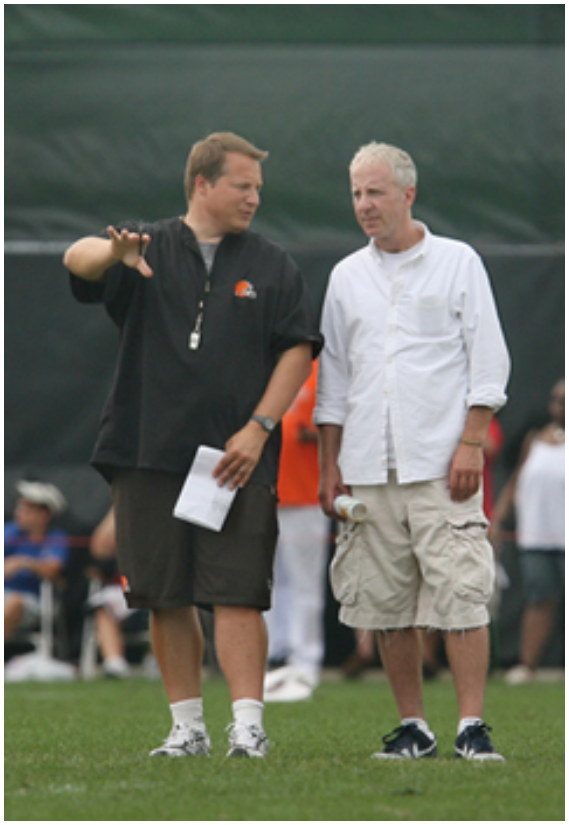
The news that some Browns backers are planning a protest of sorts for the Baltimore Ravens game on Monday November 16 has reached all the way to Lerner. Marla Ridenour of the Akron Beacon Journal asked Lerner to comment on the protest that is planned and in typical Lerner fashion he responded by email. In this week's Lingering Items, Gary hits on Lerner's reply, the chances he whacks Mangini in season one, and former GM Phil Savage's comments that Mangini "ruined" both of our quarterbacks.



There's a Peanuts cartoon by Charles Schulz in which Charlie Brown's beleaguered baseball team is getting hammered once again. Linus, I believe, is rattling off the statistics on just how bad it all is and Charlie Brown yells "tell your statistics to shut up."

It's easy to appreciate Charlie Browns' angst. It's sometimes hard facing the absolute truth of what the black and white numbers reveal. Ignoring them may have been a plot point for Peanuts, but ignoring them when it comes to the Cleveland Browns is no more a strategy than hoping that they'll change. Reality may bite and it may bite hard, but you ignore the venom at your own risk.

A statistic caught my eye today. It's a statistic that more than any other I've seen chronicling the mess in Berea, places the awfulness of it all in just the right light.

The Plain Dealer reported that in the Browns' last two games, the differential in yards between what the defense has given up and what the offense has gained is a staggering 667 yards (1003 yards given up, 336 gained). Even more alarming, it is the worst two-game differential in the entire history of the franchise, which covers over 900 games dating back to 1946. For further perspective, consider that the second worst occurred during the first two games of the 1999 expansion year.

This is a statistic you can't easily shut up. It serves as about the only counter-argument to the nonsense of those counseling patience with the new regime.

The popular theory making the rounds of the Mangini Apologist Movement is that things will inevitably get worse before they get better. By using this as the backdrop, the Apologists dismiss the mounting evidence on how bad things really are with this franchise as saying, "well, it's to be expected."

Let me take a novel approach: why? Where is it written that things must get worse in order to get better? Why can't things simply improve from where they stood initially?

It's fascinating how the narrative on this Browns' season has changed from one of steady progress to one where it's all about tearing it down in order to build it back up. Yet that's become not just the official narrative of the fledgling Apologist movement but also the official narrative of an increasingly disingenuous head coach.

What is being lost in this rush to change the storyline to one that better fits what more reasoned observers see as an abject disaster is the fact that the Browns weren't an aging team on the tail end of a good run that had reached an inevitable rebuilding point in their cycle. When Eric Mangini and his hand picked sock puppet George Kokinis took over, it was a young team with a smattering of talent.

It had only upside, or so most people thought.

What's turned out instead is that it had a much further downside, a historically, unprecedented, hide the women and children, put on the Haz Met suit, lock the doors, move out of town, shut your eyes, turn off the TV, liquidate the assets, run don't walk, gut wrenching, vomit inducing, downside.

I'll concede that the franchise wasn't in the greatest shape when Mangini and Kokinis buffaloed owner Randy Lerner, but it wasn't as bad as it is now. In fact, the franchise probably wasn't even in as bad of shape for Mangini and Kokinis as it was for former general manager Phil Savage and former head coach Romeo Crennel.

The Browns' receiving corps this year may be awful, but remember that when Mangini and Kokinis took over it also included Kellen Winslow and Braylon Edwards. Whatever you think about either of those two players, each was statistically better than anyone on the roster at the end of 2004. There was no Joe Thomas or Eric Steinbach on that 2004 squad, only Ryan Tucker and Ross Verba. There was no Shaun Rogers on that 2004 team. They were making due with the likes of Gerard Warren, Mike Myers and Ebenezer Ekuban. The defensive backfield in 2004 was better than what Mangini and Kokinis inherited, but Phil Dawson is still the place kicker and the 2004 didn't have anyone close to Josh Cribbs on special teams.

Whatever problems that 2004 team had, it never once sunk to the depths of what's now being experienced under Mangini. Savage and Crennel didn't improve the talent level enough to make the Browns a materially better team but it would be hard to make the case that they made the franchise worse. All they really did was stunt its progress, an unpardonable sin given the promises they sold.

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Taking this whole theme a bit further, just note that Mangini and Kokinis have made things far worse. It's not opinion, it's fact. By nearly every statistical measure one wants to use, this franchise is worse now than when those two took over and there is absolutely nothing to suggest that it will get any better, certainly not this year and probably not next except perhaps just through the law of averages.

In 2008, the Browns, even with all the different quarterbacks and the scoreless streak to end the season, averaged 14.5 points per game. This season they are averaging 10.3. In 2008, the offense averaged 249.1 yards per game, this season it's a meager 225.4. The offense this season is averaging 128.3 yards passing. Last season it averaged 148.8. The one area where there has been improvement, ever so slight, is on the ground. This season, the Browns are averaging 100.3 yards rushing. Last season it was 97.1 yards. A three yard improvement can't be considered meaningful progress.

It's the same story on defense. In 2008, the defense gave up an average of 21.9 points per game. This season it's up to 25.6 points. The 2008 defense yielded an average of 360.9 yards per game and now they are giving up an astounding 414.9 yards. Through the air, last year's defense gave up 204.6 yards. This year's model is at 244.3 yards. Finally, last year's defense was giving up a remarkable 151.9 yards on the ground each game. This year's defense is even worse, yielding 170.6 yards on the ground.

You can further peel away the inner layers of each of these statistics but the story just doesn't get any better. The team has regressed and not just a little, a lot.

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The Mangini Apologist Movement nonetheless keeps counseling patience in the midst of an absolute shit-storm of ineptitude as if things will magically get better if we just accept the awfulness and wait it all out without question or concern. I

appreciate someone taking the alternate view as much as anyone and I don't think less of them for doing so. But the whole basis for their view is that Mangini has somehow inherited remarkable circumstances and thus more slack must be cut.

Well, let's go back to the facts, shall we? The roster Mangini inherited was bad, but it wasn't historically bad. He then turned over nearly half of it between his trades, his draft picks and his refugees from New York. If these are remarkable circumstances, despite how abundantly unremarkable they actually are, just know then that they are self-inflicted. A killer doesn't get sympathy for murdering his parents just because he's now an orphan and Mangini doesn't get sympathy because he blew up the team and now is left with nothing but shrapnel and spare parts.

If Lerner can ever get engaged with his $1 billion investment long enough to realize that his franchise is on the precipice of sinking into complete irrelevance with a formally proud and loyal following, he might come to realize that this has nothing to do with having a hair trigger reaction to a little bad news.

This is all about correcting a major mistake that almost everyone saw coming except him. In 2007, the Miami Dolphins hired Cam Cameron, the offensive coordinator with San Diego, to lead their team. Under Cameron, the Dolphins eschewed picking Brady Quinn in the first round when they truly needed a quarterback and instead picked Ted Ginn, Jr. It was a surprise pick that turned out to be a major mistake not just because of the personnel involved because of the thought process. It ultimately revealed Cameron as someone in over his head.

Under Cameron, the Dolphins were a confused and ill-run franchise and finished the season at 1-15. As that most bitter of seasons was winding down, owner Wayne Huzienga had seen enough to know that he needed a real football professional to run the operation. He hired Bill Parcells.

Parcells didn't move on Cameron right away, he didn't need to. The year was almost over. But he did move on him quickly enough and Cameron's head coaching career ended, mercifully, after one year.

I point all this out as evidence that things don't have to get worse before they can better. Things can actually get better pretty quickly. The Dolphins aren't a great team two years later but on the other hand they did go 11-5 one year after going 1-15. All it takes is competent football minds, not head coaches with insecurity issues and wannabe executives so anxious to advance that they'll take a job on whatever bizarre conditions are imposed.

The Mangini Apologist Movement deserves the right to defend its patron saint just as much as the rest of us deserve our right to dream of a day when this franchise actually gets on the right track; a day when no one tries to advance the faulty paradigm that you must get worse to get better; a day when a truly competent football professional is running this franchise; a day when the right moves are actually made so that showing some patience actually makes sense. Let them defend Mangini all they want, but in doing so the statistics don't just have to shut up, they have to wither up and die.

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It is amusing that Phil Savage is now weighing in on the debacle; amusing because no one is really disagreeing. Savage isn't wrong when he says that both Derek Anderson and Brady Quinn seemed ruin at this point.

Anderson was awful last season and for long enough for the conclusion to be drawn that he wasn't the long term answer. But he's worse now, although he was ranked dead last statistically last season and still resides there this season. In 2008, his rating was 66.5. Now it's 40.6. Last season he at least completed half of his throws (50.2% to be exact). This season he's down to 43.8%. The average gain per pass last season was 5.7 yards. Now it's down to 4.4 yards. Last

season he threw 9 touchdowns against 8 interceptions. This season he has 2 touchdowns and 7 interceptions.

As for Quinn, 10 quarters is not enough to draw a conclusion on but in the limited time he did play he looked robotic and confused. Last season he showed confidence.

Is this Mangini's fault? It depends on how you look at the hiring of Brian Daboll as offensive coordinator. He was handpicked by Mangini, so there is that. But it's probably deeper than just Daboll. It has something to do with the lack of quality prep time in the preseason and the lack of confidence in either of them by the coaching staff. Throw in a putrid running game, lousy blocking, rookie receivers and, well, the recipe is set.

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According to the email, Lerner felt that at the end of last season the team lacked "any overall philosophy, approach or direction regarding recruiting, drafting, coaching, preparation or training. As a result, each season was feeling like starting over and 4-12 following 10-6 felt painfully not all that surprising."

Wow. What a damning indictment not just of Savage and Crennel but also of himself. But he's not wrong. The Browns didn't stand for anything and fell for everything and Lerner is as much to blame for that as anyone. He's the one constant.

But perhaps the more surprising element of the email is his recognition, albeit indirect, that something else indeed might be needed. Lerner wrote:

"What I can say is that we, and I, have remained open to new and fresh ideas and thinking and people with passion for the Browns....We won't become entrenched or stubborn and despite my allergy to be more conspicuous, I do remain eager to seek help and guidance from any and all corners."

This may be happy talk by Lerner to try and mute the deafening roar of discontent building around his franchise, but assuming he's sincere then Mangini shouldn't feel safe much longer. If Lerner really is seeking help from all corners, then hopefully he's listening to those who can see what Mangini can't acknowledge, that this team is measurably worse now then it was when last season ended and Mangini is chiefly the reason why.

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It's clear that this team needs a far more professional and competent front office. In that vein, this week's question to ponder: What would it take for Lerner to be able to successfully lure Ozzie Newsome back to Cleveland?