Maybe it was the rum balls. Gary Benz went to the office Christmas party the other night and while he generally refrains from sampling most of what people try to pass off as holiday treats, someone said "you just have to try Jill's rum balls." Which he did. Several hours later, he awoke in a cold sweat after an incredibly vivid dream. There Gary was, inside the Browns' Berea complex, attending head coach Eric Mangini's Wednesday press conference. A very entertaining read from Mr. Benz ...

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I went to the office Christmas party the other night and while I generally refrain from sampling most of what people try to pass off as holiday treats, someone said "you just have to try Jill's rum balls." Which I did. Several hours later, I awoke in a cold sweat after an incredibly vivid dream.

There I was, inside the Browns' Berea complex, attending head coach Eric Mangini's Wednesday press conference.

"Good morning. How is everyone today?" He didn't wait for an answer and just jumped right in. "We have Kansas City this week. They've struggled a bit this season just like us but I know they're going to come in here and compete hard. We're still a little banged up by our practices have been crisp and I think the guys are still engaged and enthused. I'm looking forward to the

match-up."

Then came the question: "Coach, can you talk a little about the fact that Randy Lerner has been meeting with Mike Holmgren about a job that would essentially make Holmgren your boss. Any concerns?"

"Look, Tony. You know I like to keep those kinds of things in-house. I met with Mike and we had a chance to have a nice talk about how the season's going, that sort of thing."

"But Coach, are you at all concerned that you really don't have any connection with Holmgren? Do you think he'll give you a fair shot at keeping your job?"

"Again, Tony, I'd rather not get into the specifics. I try to stay focused on the task at hand and ask the players to do the same. Mike and I have great mutual respect. Any questions about the Kansas City game?"

That's when I pounced.

"Coach. Can't you see why you have a problem with the fans in this town? Questions get asked, some difficult, some not. You just gloss over them and it makes you look like you don't care. That's the impression you give the fans. You act like letting them in on a little of what's really going on is the worst thing since they moved ‘Friday Night Lights' to DirecTV."

"Gary, I understand your point. I really do. There's a time and place for questions like that and this isn't it."

"What do you mean this isn't it? It's a press conference. It's exactly the time and place."

Then came a long pause. Mangini, gripping the podium with both hands as his knuckles whitened, looked like he just had an attack of colitis. His face scrunched. His eyes shifted left then right. Then he left out a huge sigh.

"Folks, look. I'm going to go off script here. It's not something I like to do. It's not something I'm comfortable doing. But maybe Gary's right.

"Here's the thing. This has been about the roughest year of my life. I got fired from a job I really loved. I didn't think it was fair. Woody Johnson never brought his concerns to me about how the players felt. I didn't get a chance to give him my side. He just said the team was going in another direction and that was that. It was devastating. It doesn't matter how much money you make. When you get fired it's about the worst thing that can happen to you. It sucks the breath right out of you. It makes your knees buckle. Your mind suddenly fills with a thousand thoughts. ‘What do I tell my wife and kids?' ‘Will I find another job?' ‘Will I have to move?' If you've been through something like that then you'll know what I mean.

"Then Mr. Lerner called and we had several nice chats. I've known Romeo Crennel for years and I hated to see him get fired. He's a fine, fine man. Honestly, when Mr. Lerner finally offered me the job I wasn't quite sure I wanted it. Not because it's the Browns and not because it's Cleveland. Just because I didn't want to look like I was disrespecting Romeo.

"But a friend of mine told me that my taking the job had nothing to do with Romeo getting fired. Every coach eventually gets fired. It's the business. So after discussing it with my wife, we felt it was a good move for us personally and professionally. I came in here very excited.

"Then I got off on the wrong foot. I don't really know why I ignored Shaun Rogers at that banquet. He's actually a really sweet guy. I was just being a jerk, full of myself for landing a new job so quickly. It was a mistake. It's my job to connect with my players, not the other way around. It was stupid and I regret it.

"Then came the whole thing with hiring George Kokinis. George and I go way back. In fact, we both spent some time in Cleveland in our very early days, as I think all of you know. I love George like a brother and that's why I wanted him here. I knew it looked awkward, like I was hiring my own boss. I read what everyone around this town wrote about it, everyone that is except Bill Livingston. I just can't seem to get through one of his columns."

The assembled group broke out in laughter. Then Mangini continued.

"I figured that even though it didn't look right George and I would make it work. Yea, he was in charge of football operations, but he and I always envisioned it as a partnership. But as we got going, I wanted to accelerate the time table of getting this operation improved. George was more deliberate. That's not a criticism, just a fact. As the days went by, I kept pushing harder and harder for more and more changes. When George wasn't responding as quickly as I wanted, I kind of took over and pushed him aside.

"In retrospect, that was a mistake. I was the one that let George down, not the other way around. I owe George a huge apology and that's something that I'll be doing privately when he and I both have the time. I don't want to just make a perfunctory phone call. I want to talk to him man-to-man, own up to my mistakes and hopefully he'll forgive me and he and I can be friends. I also plan to talk with Mr. Lerner to make sure George gets the money he deserves. Maybe hiring him under the circumstances was a mistake, but I really screwed up his exit."

Mangini wasn't even close to done.

"I know a lot of you want to know about what happened with the draft. Well, this team needs players. I think the best way to build a team, on both sides of the ball, is from the line out. That's why I traded down to a slot where I knew I could get Alex Mack and some extra picks. Alex is making good progress. He has a great future.

"What I think most of you want to know about, though, is that second round and in particular Brian Robiskie and David Veikune. Let me start with Brian. I know this is Ohio State territory and Brian is a local kid. I should have understood that sooner and been more upfront with the fans.

"I know we need receivers and it seemed like deactivating Brian was just about trying to teach him a lesson. Actually, that's exactly what it was. I decided to deactivate him so much this season in part to show him that just being a second rounder doesn't guarantee playing time. To me, some things are bigger than a particular moment, a particular game. Lessons need to get learned and I thought Brian needed to learn that. Maybe that's harsh and maybe I could have handled it differently, but I felt it was the best decision at the time.

"As for David, in truth his selection was a stretch. I think David has a chance to contribute on this team and in this league but not right now. He's changing positions and he's just too raw. I know a lot of you think that since this season is about development anyway why don't I just throw him out there. To me, that would be irresponsible. I'm also trying to develop a lot of other players and they are further ahead of the curve right now.

"Since we're talking about players, let me say a few things about Braylon Edwards and Kellen Winslow. When I got here one of the first players I met with was Kellen. He was brutally honest with me. He wanted out of Cleveland. This place held mostly bad memories for him and he wanted a change of scenery. He said that if he remained here he'd work hard but his heart wouldn't be in it. I appreciated what he said and told him I'd work to accommodate the request. I understand that sometimes the situation just isn't right.

"With Braylon, it was a much different situation. He's a disruptive guy. I know he had the one Pro Bowl season but the trick is to follow that up. He couldn't. When I looked at the film on him from last season, it wasn't just the dropped passes. He gave minimal effort on his blocking assignments. If he knew the pass wasn't coming to him he would run sloppy routes. He had Randy Moss' attitude but not Randy Moss' accomplishments. Then when he had that fight outside a bar after a game in which everyone on the team, Braylon included, played terribly, I just felt it was enough. He had to go. Frankly, I was surprised the Jets gave us as much as they did.

"I know a lot of you also have asked several times about all the ex-Jets players I brought in. My biggest mistake there was not explaining my thinking, which is something I need to correct in myself. All of them were just players that I felt understood my program and would help out all the new guys. A football team is like any other workplace. A lot happens when the boss isn't around. If there are guys around that understand what you're trying to do, it helps when players are just talking with each other. I'd do it again, but I know I would be more straightforward with you guys about it. You and the fans deserve that much."

Now he was getting contrite.

"I know I haven't been perfect this year. Honestly, I understand the perspective of those who think I should be fired. It's mostly of my own making. I need to become a better person in order to become a better coach. These are changes I need to make and whether they're here in Cleveland or somewhere else, those changes will get made.

"I also wish I would have handled Jamal Lewis differently. He leaves this league hating me, I'll understand it. You know, teams are made up of all sorts of players. But every team has a guy like Jamal, an established veteran who works harder than the rookies. I knew Jamal had lost a step and really wasn't in our plans going forward and I let that cloud my judgment. I should have embraced

him. He deserved that much. I think that would have helped me more in the locker room.

"I also am sorry about how I've handled Josh Cribbs' contract situation. Mr. Lerner told me that he and Phil Savage had promised Josh a new deal. I just felt like I wanted to see more from Josh before that got done. I should have kept my mouth shut. A person is only as good as his word and if Mr. Lerner made that commitment I should have lived with it and got that contract done. I'm getting that corrected and hope to have a new deal done with him within the next few weeks, at the latest.

"As for Brady Quinn, in truth, and I hope this doesn't get me in trouble with the Players Association, but I did bench him because of his contract. It was a business decision and those kinds of decisions get made in the NFL every day. Truthfully, building a team isn't just about finding guys with talent. There is still the financial side of things and that factors into every decision. I knew we weren't going anywhere this season and we'll probably not be going much further next season. I like Brady and he's played better but I'm not completely sold on him as our long term answer. I want him back next year but I couldn't see dedicating that much salary to him when I've got about 15 other key holes to fill as well.

As he spoke, Mangini seemed to get more and more comfortable, as if he had just passed a kidney stone the size of a grapefruit that had been stuck for the last 10 years. Confession looked to be good for his soul.

"Let's talk about spygate and Bill Belichick. What the heck was I thinking?" And as Mangini started to get into great detail, the assembled media couldn't believe what they were hearing. This was a new Mangini, a coach that they could embrace. Someone who could admit he wasn't perfect, that not everything he's done was to further some mythical process and that yes, he did make mistakes, many of them. Stories started appearing everywhere. I couldn't wait to write about the change and tell the world that maybe I had misjudged Mangini all along. And as the next few days passed into the next few weeks,

suddenly Mangini was the toast of the town.

He was a frequent guest on every radio station, sat for interviews with the local papers, could be seen joking on the sidelines with his players as the team finished out the season in style, all while still finding time to hand out new coats to the homeless bought with money he donated. And as Mangini began to blossom, the permanent fog hanging over Berea started lifting.

But just as suddenly as the dream started, it ended. I was in a cold sweat and my stomach was doing a Texas two-step. As I laid there awake it occurred to me that if the real Mangini could be even half as candid as the dream Mangini, no one would be calling for his head and the last thing he'd have to worry about is who Lerner hires to oversee the empire and the fans could actually have something legitimate to point to as progress instead of breaking down the remaining games by the sum of their plays to find progress.

It was then I realized, too, that yea, it must have been the rum balls.