The Cleveland Browns, ensconced in a season of historically bizarre proportions, have finally given their fans a reason to celebrate the holiday season and it has nothing to do with refunds. Randy Lerner, apparently tiring of all the complaining his indifferent tenure has brought about, finally got something right. He said he would bring a serious, credible leader in to run his football operations and he's done just that in the hiring of Mike Holmgren as the club's president, according to reports. The formal introduction of Holmgren is expected to occur next week. Gary Benz gives us his thoughts on the hire.

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For those following the Lerner arc, the hiring of Holmgren serves as the equivalent of Lerner's hiring of Martin O'Neill, one of the most credible names in soccer, to be

the manager of his Aston Villa franchise. All O'Neill did was turn Lerner's willingness to spend into money well spent and in the process transform Aston Villa from a laughingstock franchise to one of the shining stars of the English Premier League. Hopefully Holmgren will have the same impact on this side of the ocean.

Lerner has been on a little bit of a roll lately with his hires after swinging and missing so badly last offseason. The hiring of Fred Nance, ostensibly as general counsel, may be lesser known to the fan base but he's every bit as serious and credible as Holmgren and his presence will have a similar impact.

Nance, as much as anyone, was instrumental in bringing this version of the Browns back to Cleveland after Art Modell moved his old team to Baltimore. He also was under consideration for the NFL Commissioner job that ultimately went to Roger Goodell. None of that makes him qualified to decide who the Browns should draft next June, but what it does do is make him qualified to be that serious voice on behalf of the Browns within the NFL's inner sanctum that they currently lack. In tandem with Holmgren, the Browns will no longer lack for connections.

One of the biggest problems with Lerner's ownership has been his extreme lack of interest in actually running the franchise. Sure, he's a fan. He probably views himself as a super fan. But he simply has other more important interests that occupy his time these days than heading to NFL meetings and paying attention to such mundane but important issues as revenue sharing and the state of the collective bargaining agreement.

Because Lerner has been so indifferent toward all the vestiges of his ownership, he hasn't developed the critical contacts he needs within the various NFL circles; contacts that could have kept this franchise from veering so far off track. Lerner's been operating far too much in a vacuum when it comes to making critical decisions about the direction and future of this franchise that it's no wonder it's in the current state it's in.

His hiring of both Eric Mangini and George Kokinis will turn out to be the watershed events that finally put into motion the makings of a credible franchise that culminated with the hiring of both Nance and Holmgren.

To go back a bit, Lerner was completely underserved, both on the business side and on the field, by former general manager Phil Savage. In Savage, Lerner felt he was getting the face of the franchise, someone who could represent him to the fans and inside the league and be that serious, credible voice. Savage was never comfortable in that role. He's a scout at heart, far more comfortable watching East Carolina play Western Kentucky on a Thursday night than pushing papers at a desk and sipping Macallum 18 with Jerry Jones at the hospitality suite inside the Scottsdale Princess during league meetings.

When Savage imploded on the heels of his bungling of the Kellen Winslow situation and the ill-advised f-bomb he directed in writing to a fan, Lerner suddenly found himself pretty much alone on an island of his own making. He had no one credible inside the organization and no established inner circle within the league. Ernie Accorsi is a good contact but he's retired and drifting further and further from the game each day. Others in the league just didn't know him enough to take him into their confidence.

As a result Lerner, as uniquely unqualified as someone in his position could possibly be, was left on his own to basically draw up what he wanted in a new coach to replace Romeo Crennel. The key, Lerner believed, was that the new coach had to have head coaching experience. To Lerner, that was a marker for bringing credibility to the franchise.

When Mangini came available, Lerner pounced. In doing so, he never bothered to do even perfunctory due diligence with Mangini's former employer, New York Jets owner Woody Johnson. Most places do more due diligence in hiring a mail room clerk.

Compounding the problem was that Lerner then let Mangini hire his own boss in the form of Kokinis and we've all seen where that ended, with Kokinis being escorted from the premises by security and filing a claim for the money he's been denied for supposedly not fulfilling his contract. Yet this huge mistake and all it entails finally did cause a light switch of sorts to finally click on for Lerner. It led to the hiring of first Nance and now Holmgren.

Holmgren comes into the franchise at a very curious moment. Though the team has been mostly miserable and has only 3 wins thus far to show for all that's transpired, two of those wins have come in their last two games. The players' commitment to Mangini has vacillated all season and yet as of late, when going through the motions is usually the easiest, the team has played its most inspired football of the season.

It probably won't be the first order of business for Holmgren but it will be close: what to do about Mangini? It's a far more complicated question than most fans think. Mangini has never carried himself as if he were brought in simply to be the head coach, like Romeo Crennel, and for good reason. Lerner gave Mangini a pretty wide berth in which to operate and pretty much yielded all football authority to him. The dismissal of Kokinis, directly at the urging of Mangini, only solidified Mangini's power base.

When Holmgren comes aboard, there will be no question that he'll be the new sheriff in town. He'll not only have the badge to prove it but a fully loaded gun and the permission to shoot at will. The real question is whether he'll shoot in Mangini's direction.

The answer to that depends completely on whether or not he believes Mangini will be happy accepting a demotion back to deputy. Mangini likes to say he had no problem with the set up in New York under Mike Tannebaum, but it's interesting that Mangini made sure that he wouldn't have to endure a similar situation in Cleveland by bringing Kokinis aboard.

Mangini also likes to talk about how he welcomes anybody joining the team that can help move it forward. It's the right thing to say, but Holmgren isn't coming in as another voice for Mangini to consider as he goes about his business in solitude. He's not being brought aboard at that kind of money (reportedly $5 million a year for the next 10 years) to smile for the cameras and offer curbside opinions like Jim Brown. The franchise will be his to run.

For Mangini to stay on as coach it isn't going to come down to the incremental progress of an otherwise miserable team over the last few weeks. It will depend solely on whether Mangini can make what amounts to the biggest adjustment in his professional career. That may mean adjusting to a much different offensive scheme that's more to Holmgren's liking. It could mean adjusting his coaching techniques and training regimen. It certainly will mean yielding authority over player acquisition, including the upcoming draft. In other words, Mangini will have to be satisfied simply being a head coach, like Crennel, and having head coach input, nothing more.

This all play out in the weeks and months to come. But for now, Lerner's hiring of first, Nance, and now Holmgren finally does signify that the Browns are headed in the right direction. It's about time.