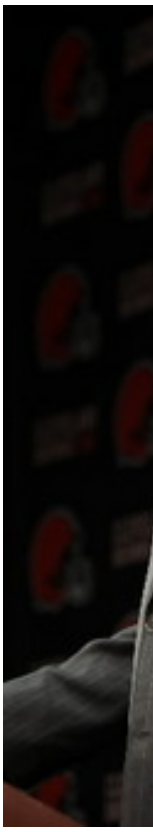
To quote Judge Smails of "Caddyshack" fame ... "Well ... we're waiting." Yes, the Cleveland Browns nation sits and waits for new team President Mike Holmgren to decide the fate of the once loathed, now loved Eric Mangini. As we slog through the murky swamp that has become Mangini's Browns future, we can't help but wonder whether even Holmgren himself was anticipating this touch-and-go decision process. There are certainly a whole host of legitimate plusses and minuses to keeping Mangini on board. Erik Cassano looks at them in his latest.



By the time you read this, you may already know Eric Mangini's fate as Browns coach. The situation is fluid, and changeable by the hour.

As the hours have gone by this week, the one constant has been uncertainty. New team president Mike Holmgren appeared in front of the cameras at his first official Browns press conference on Tuesday, essentially saying that he'd like to have a decision on Mangini's future soon. But not too soon. It could be by the end of the week. Or maybe he extends his self-imposed deadline for more consultation, maybe a subsequent meeting with the team's first-year (and possibly last-year) coach.

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When Holmgren agreed to take the reins of the franchise a couple of weeks ago, he might have had a pretty good idea of how he wanted to proceed. Which is to

say, his own coach and his own general manager. The type of organization Holmgren wanted to build here -- rooted in his Bill Walsh-based upbringing as a coach -- is in stark contrast to Mangini's background, heavily influenced by Bill Belichick, who is a branch on the Bill Parcells coaching tree.

On top of that, the results produced by Mangini offered no reference that favored keeping his job. When Holmgren took the job on Dec. 21, the Browns had just won back to back games against Pittsburgh and Kansas City, but they still stood at a bottom-feeding 3-11.

Heroic performances by Josh Cribbs and Jerome Harrison aside, the decision for Holmgren was as easy as a snap of the fingers. Season ends, Mangini gets his walking papers, and Holmgren sets about finding a coach and GM who have the same football philosophies that he does.

But we're talking about the Browns here. It can never be that simple. Something with tentacles always comes along and inks the water.

The ink cloud came in the form of the season's final two games, against Oakland and Jacksonville. The Browns won both games. You could even say they won both games convincingly. The Raiders definitely aided their own demise with serial personal fouls in a 23-9 Browns win, but it was still a game the Browns pretty much controlled start to finish.

In the season finale last Sunday, the Browns jumped out to an early 10-point lead over the Jaguars and seemed to control the flow and pace of the game for 60 minutes. The final score read 23-17, but it wasn't quite that close.

In short, taken purely within its own context, December 2009/January 2010 was the Browns' most successful month of the expansion era. Four wins, one loss, and that loss to San Diego way back on December 6 contained a furious fourth-quarter rally that fell short. The month contained their first four-game winning streak since 1994 and their first four-game streak of 160-plus rushing yards since 1968.

Production appeared from all directions. The accomplishments of Cribbs and Harrison are well-documented, but the Browns also received noteworthy contributions from lesser-known names on defense, like Matt Roth, Marcus Benard and Ahtyba Rubin. Joe Thomas and Alex Mack continues to grow as

current and future stalwarts of the offensive line. Lawrence Vickers played a key role in helping Harrison roll up a series of 100-yard rushing efforts.

The Browns came together in the season's final month. You can say it was because of Mangini or in spite of Mangini, but the key fact is that Mangini was presiding, and it has forced Holmgren to soften his stance on how he wants to move forward.

Holmgren has to consider both the pluses and minuses of keeping Mangini on board, even for just next season, with no guarantee afterward. When laying everything out on the table, here are the factors Holmgren has to be looking at:

Why Mangini should stay:

1. Maybe Mangini was right all along

Maybe it is a process. Maybe it took almost a year for Mangini to instill his own brand of discipline on a resistant roster. Maybe it took that long to weed out some of the dissenters and negative influences like Braylon Edwards, Kellen Winslow and Jamal Lewis. Maybe going from Club Romeo to something resembling a real NFL team was actually this difficult.

If that is the case, it would be a setback to stomp the sprouts growing from the seeds Mangini has sowed in the past year.

2. Mangini grew as a coach this year

At times, it's easy to forget that Mangini is only 38 -- a tyke by NFL head coaching standards. He's still growing in his job as much as his players are. And he underwent a great deal of growth this season.

Mangini came to town like a tornado. Fresh off the ego rush of being given total control of the football operations by Randy Lerner, Mangini quickly became enthralled with the idea of himself as an authoritarian ruler. His disciplinary tactics were heavy-handed (who can forget the story from the preseason, when Mangini reportedly fined a player $1,700 for not paying for a bottle of hotel water?). He was aloof toward the media. He grated on players. Jamal Lewis criticized Mangini for allowing too much contact in practice. Rookie running back James Davis was lost for the season due to a shoulder injury on a post-practice contact drill that

was reportedly approved by Mangini.

But Mangini's attitude seemed to soften considerably when GM George Kokinis parted ways with the team in November. Kokinis alleged that Mangini went over his head on personnel decisions, including the Edwards trade, effectively undermining Kokinis' decision-making power over the roster. Kokinis, a longtime associate of Mangini going back to their days as interns with the Belichick Browns, was escorted from headquarters in Berea, which tends to make you think he had some choice words for Mangini on his way out the door.

With his GM gone, the losses piling up and speculation rampant that he was doomed to be a one-and-done coach in Cleveland, Mangini seemed to shift from a dictator with a grand scheme to a coach just trying to win each Sunday and save his job.

Perhaps, over the course of the season, Mangini went from being the team, to being a team player. If that's the case, the idea of keeping him around for another year becomes a lot more palatable.

3. Rob Ryan

In the end, this probably won't be anything that Holmgren considers when deciding Mangini's fate, but hiring Ryan as defensive coordinator is easily the best personnel move Mangini has made. Ryan looks like a cross between Santa Claus and a drifter, but he's inherited the defensive smarts of his dad, Buddy Ryan. And he's a passionate leader, which players latch onto. Ryan has taken a defense of mostly no-names and gotten them to play over their heads on more than one occasion this season -- most notably in the win over the Steelers.

The stats might not bear it out, but Ryan is an excellent defensive coordinator. Unfortunately, if Mangini goes, Ryan probably goes, too.

Why Mangini should go:

1. Differences in team-building and coaching philosophies

Obviously, the most glaring reason why Holmgren and Mangini can't coexist. You don't hire a French instructor to teach a Spanish class. And that's the essential difference between Holmgren's football background and Mangini's. It's no one's

fault. It's just a fact of life in this situation.

2. Should the last month really make up for the previous 11?

The ledger still says Mangini did a lot more wrong than right over the past year. The draft netted Alex Mack and Mohamed Massaquoi, who both look like keepers. But for a team that was slated to pick fifth overall, Mangini's trade-down draft strategy looks like an overall goof. David Veikune, a non-contributor taken in the second round, is the poster boy for Mangini's draft-day ineptitude.

You could make a case that Mangini bungled the quarterback competition in training camp, waiting way too long to name a starter. And there is no question that there was a major communication breakdown between he and Kokinis over personnel authority, which led to the breakdown of their relationship.

3. Star search

Mangini doesn't like to deal with the egos of star players. He'd rather build a team of role players that is greater than the sum of its parts. Holmgren's background includes the likes of Joe Montana, Steve Young and Brett Favre. He wants stars, particularly at quarterback.

Asking Mangini, who can come off as aloof at times and has well-documented shortcomings as a communicator, to oversee an egotistical starting quarterback who needs equal parts butt-kicking and shoulder-massaging, might not be the best idea. As we saw in '08, when Favre and Mangini attempted to coexist with the Jets. It was the last season for both QB and coach in that organization.