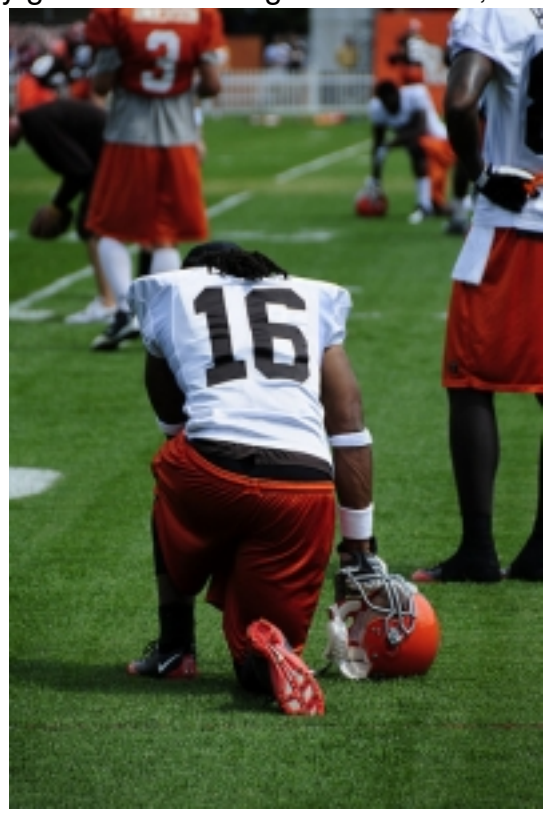
Let's put aside for the moment Cleveland Browns' president Mike Holgrem's decision to retain head coach Eric Mangini or even Holmgren's pursuit of his general manager to focus on Josh Cribbs. Despite all the major goings on in Berea this week, it's Cribbs and his contract dispute that has garnered most of the attention. In Gary's opinion, Cribbs has a pork chop agent in J.R. Rickert, whose amateurish antics are tarnishing the reputation of his earnest and gullible client. Gary gives us his thoughts on Rickert, Cribbs, and the contract impasse in his latest piece for us.



Let's put aside for the moment Cleveland Browns' president Mike Holgrem's decision to retain head coach Eric Mangini or even Holmgren's pursuit of his general manager to focus on Josh Cribbs. Despite all the major goings on in Berea this week, it's Cribbs and his contract dispute that has garnered most of the attention.

Here's what I know about the Cribbs situation: J.R. Rickert is a lousy agent. All Rickert has done for the last several days is prove that he's an amateur among professionals and the person caught in the middle is his earnest and gullible client.

Cribbs last signed a contract extension before the 2007 season. It was a six-year

deal that gave him more than $1 million in guaranteed money. Then, of course, Cribbs went on to have a breakout season in 2007 and made the Pro Bowl. He had a very good 2008 and then, beginning last May, he began asking for a new contract.

When May turned into June and June eventually into December, Cribbs added another Pro Bowl selection to his resume but still found himself without that new contract.

The timing of Cribbs' contract demand last May coincided with his hiring of Ricket. Agents in the NFL get new clients by convincing those prospective clients that their previous agents were hacks and that they deserve a new contract. It's how Drew Rosenhaus got famous.

In Rickert's case, all he had to do was focus Cribbs on his contract and how the Browns were literally stealing money from him for paying him as if he was still an undrafted free agent instead of the Pro Bowl player he's become.

Once Cribbs signed with Rickert, the pressure on the Browns began. Taking a page from his Sports Agent 101 handbook, Rickert has worked the public relations angle in the same way that that striking school teachers work the parents by claiming it's all about the "best interests of the students."

Although the Browns have mostly yawned at Rickert's histrionics, he has managed to shape public opinion. Right now, most Browns fans have concluded that Cribbs is underpaid with no basis to come to that conclusion except emotional.

Cribbs is clearly the Browns' best player on about 10 different levels. He worked his way up from undrafted free agent out of Kent State to possibly the league's most valuable kick returner and special teams player. He never gives less than

full effort. He's excellent in the community. In short, he's pretty much been everything anyone can ask of a professional athlete in any sport. In terms of this team, he's been the one consistent source of pride for a franchise far more use to embarrassing itself.

Objectively, Cribbs is underpaid relative to his peers but not necessarily as much as Rickert would like the public to think. But even if Cribbs was grossly underpaid relative to his peers, that's only part of the equation anyway.

The fact remains that Cribbs, without a gun to his head, signed that six-year contract in order to secure a million dollar payoff upfront. Maybe it wasn't the best business decision of his life, but it wasn't his worst and in any case his current contract is a burden he brought on voluntarily. For anyone to summarily conclude that the Browns aren't being fair is itself unfair.

There also is the issue of setting a precedent by renegotiating so early into a new contract. From a business standpoint, even before the ink is dry on Cribbs' new contract, the line will start forming outside of its new general manager's office of players who likewise want a better deal.

But there also is another side to the whole matter and that's the side where it appears that owner Randy Lerner and former general manager Phil Savage both promised Cribbs a new contract and then didn't follow through. A delay in that regard could be excused once Savage was fired after last season, but Lerner has remained and it was his moral if not legal duty to make sure that his new head coach Eric Mangini took care of fulfilling Lerner's commitments quickly.

From almost the minute Mangini got this assignment he put it down pretty low on his priority list. Mangini always felt that if Cribbs was due more money it would be because his value to the team would be greater than just on special teams. A major reason why the Browns kept pushing Cribbs into the mix as a wide receiver was an effort to expand his role and justify a bigger contract.

Cribbs has shown himself to be merely average, at best, as a NFL receiver. That's not a sin, just a fact. He's far more valuable in the wildcat formation where he can better utilize his running skills and still remain as a threat to throw the ball. But the wildcat formation is and always will be a change of pace. No team in the NFL can survive on a steady diet of that kind of formation.

Thus where Cribbs finds himself still is one of the most valuable special teams players in the league and a decent but not overwhelming threat on offense. What, ultimately, is all that worth?

Enter Rickert. The truth is that even Rickert can't figure it out. In one conversation he'll equate Cribbs to Devin Hester and in the next conversation say he's not seeking Hester-like money. Rickert will then pull out supposedly comparable salaries in the $3 million/year range but then say that he's not looking for that kind of money, either. All we really know is that he thinks an $800,000 a year salary increase is an insult.

The person to feel sorry for in all of this is Cribbs and not because he's suffering financially. Cribbs is sincere to a fault. He wears his emotions on his sleeve, both good and bad. When the Browns didn't respond to Rickert's latest ludicrous threat to get back to him by 5 p.m. last Wednesday or else he'd go public, it was Cribbs that had to deal with the backlash.

Cribbs supposedly has cleaned out his locker and, at the moment, doesn't believe he'll ever be back with the Browns. It's the line Rickert laid in front of him but Cribbs, true to his nature, delivered it truthfully and in heartbreaking fashion. Cribbs may believe it at the moment but that doesn't mean there's a shred of truth to it.

Negotiation on any deal, be it for a player in the NFL or for a TV at the local Best Buy, is about leverage. The more you have, the easier it is to strike a better deal. Rickert knows he has absolutely no leverage at the moment. He has a client with

3 years remaining on a contract and absolutely no way to extricate him from it at the moment.

Rickert can demand until his face turns red that the Browns trade Cribbs but the Browns are under no obligation to honor that request. Cribbs can threaten to sit out but if he does, whenever he returns he'll still have 3 years remaining on his contract.

Rickert said recently that Jay Cutler finagled his way out of Denver by demanding a trade and thus the same thing can happen here. But comparing Cutler and Cribbs is laughable. Cutler wasn't particularly well-liked in Denver and no one really shed a tear when he left. It also helped that Denver had a whole new management team that made parting with an underachiever like Cutler even easier.

In Cleveland, Cribbs is anything but a persona non grata. He's wildly popular with his fans and the entire team. Holmgren may have no connection with Cribbs but he's smart enough to know and appreciate Cribbs' value.

What will really happen is that once things settle a bit in Berea, Cribbs will get his contract extended, which is pretty much the same thing as renegotiated but it gives the Browns cover with other players and their agents.

The extension will push the contract out a few more years at least and will include a huge, guaranteed signing bonus and perhaps some roster bonuses in the next 3 years to raise Cribbs' take home pay in those years without changing his salary. And when it gets all done everyone will be all smiles with each side announcing how thrilled they are that Cribbs will be with the Browns for the remainder of his career.

Rickert, of course, will then use the Cribbs situation to lure another player into his

stable and this same scenario will play out somewhere else without anyone the wiser that this whole thing would have gotten done in pretty much the same way even if Cribbs had never hired Rickert in the first place.