For the past year as fans, we've operated under one unwavering assumption when it comes to the Browns:Mike Holmgren is the key to success, in the short term and long term. Therefore, the Browns must do whatever is necessary to keep Holmgren in the fold. If that means allowing Holmgren to scratch his still-existent coaching itch on the Browns' sideline, so be it. No matter how much improvement Eric Mangini shows, losing Holmgren to another organization would cancel it out a hundred times over.

So even if Mangini can demonstrate marked, steady on-field improvement as evidence of his staff's effectiveness, if Holmgren wants the headset, Mangini gets the boot. Is it fair? No. Is it worth it to keep the man who helped mold Brett Favre into a Hall of Famer? Yes.

Up until the Browns delivered the Saints a trick-play induced haymaker in New Orleans, that line of thinking wasn't even questioned. Over the bye week and heading toward the showdown with New England this past Sunday, there was some cause for debate, but most fans still couldn't stomach a Browns team with Mangini but no Holmgren.

But then at a press conference last week, Holmgren reiterated, in a roundabout way, his desire to return to the coaching ranks. Then Mangini took his old mentor Bill Belichick out behind the woodshed in a 34-14 roasting of the Patriots over the weekend. Mangini outclassed Belichick in the battle of coaching wits, which is kind of like out-thinking Stephen Hawking on the subject of theoretical physics.

Now, it's fair to open the floor to debate: if the time comes when Randy Lerner must decide whether to allow Holmgren to take over his team's coaching job, or risk losing him to another team's open coaching position, what decision should he make? If Mangini's team continues to trend upward, is it really in the best interest of the organization to pull the plug on his tenure just to make sure the more-accomplished Holmgren stays put?

What exactly do the Browns need from Holmgren, and is it possible that he has already put all the thumbprint he's ever going to put on the Browns?When Holmgren agreed to take over as president of the Browns last December, he was taking over a team with no general manager and a severely-frayed coach who had been worn down by endless media criticism, the stress of turning over a roster that included human hand grenades like Kellen Winslow and Braylon Edwards, and the fracturing of his relationship with former GM George Kokinis.

The Browns of last year were in desperate need of a strong guiding hand, and Holmgren provided that almost immediately. He oversaw the hiring of Tom Heckert as GM. He dusted Mangini off and determined that the young coach was a fixer-upper, not recycle-bin wreckage.

As pointed out in a New York Times article from earlier this week, Mangini reached a moment of self-realization in January of this year. From that point forward, he became more committed to his coaching and more committed to his health, dropping weight, attempting to kick a chewing tobacco habit and -- above all -- listening to the three Super Bowls' worth of experience Holmgren was willing to impart on his quasi-pupil.

The result has been a renewed Mangini, fitter, happier, and finally past his Belichick-wannabe phase. The new Mangini is more open, self-effacing, even funny at times. Above all, he's a more confident coach who now has developing people skills to pair with a Belichick-bred football acumen.

If this really is a complete new beginning for Mangini, he's reaching a rebirth at the green age of 39. He could be the Browns' coach for a decade or longer, which would be a refreshing change from the organizational carousel we've had to endure, while the likes of Belichick and Bill Cowher stay nestled in their coaching jobs for 10 to 15 years or longer.

Holmgren, by contrast, is 62. Chances are, he wouldn't last more than five to seven years in any coaching job. That could certainly be enough time to win the Browns a Super Bowl, but once Holmgren leaves, the regime shifts again, and the Browns are right back in a state of upheaval.

At his advancing age and vast experience level, Holmgren's best possible impact on any organization is the impact felt after he leaves. Did he hire the right successors? Did he teach them the right things? Can the organization still move forward and win once Holmgren has moved to his retirement villa?

With that in mind, the best possible outcome for the Holmgren Era is one where Mangini turns into one of the most successful coaches in Browns history, Heckert reaches the Bill Polian class of roster architects, and ultimately, Holmgren becomes an unncessary layer of management.

Ultimately, the Browns don't want an organization where Holmgren has to stick around and ensure that everyone is doing their jobs right. The Browns want an organization where Heckert and Mangini are so good at their jobs, it would be an insult to keep Holmgren on the payroll as a babysitter.

Whether we realize it or not, Holmgren not only got the ball rolling in that direction, the ball might already be most of the way there. Not to a Super Bowl berth, but to an organization capable of building and sustaining that type of team.

There is still drafting to do, still coaching to be done, still decisions to be made at all levels of the Browns organization. But this franchise is already miles ahead of where they were 11 months ago. Holmgren could still stick around for another year or two and help some more -- and there is a good chance he will -- but if the Cowboys or Vikings come calling and it becomes apparent that Holmgren is going to be pacing the sideline somewhere in 2011, the Browns and Holmgren can still part ways with a clear conscience on both ends.

Holmgren still has some gas left in the coaching tank, and he might be the right coaching hire for a veteran team trying to make a Super Bowl push. But for the Browns, he's probably not the right coach. He's the right president. And in the U.S., presidents have term limits. It keeps the balance of power in check and ensures progress.

In leveland, progress needs to come in the form of Heckert and Mangini leading the Browns to better days ahead, and continuing it after Holmgren has hung up his whistle for good.