Week 15 – Cleveland at Cincinnati

The Bell tolls for thee, Eric Mangini.

It goes without saying that this is not the ideal way to end this season or save your job (if it is truly on the line). Controversial coaching decisions, an ineffective and redundant game plan, a listless, lifeless team... no, this is certainly not what you need at this delicate juncture.

Then there was also his taking over the Defensive play calling on Sunday. Yeah, the Defense wasn't doing crap and he has every right to do what he did.

But this might not be the best time to fracture his relationship with his popular Defensive Coordinator.

I'm not saying it wasn't the right thing to do - I'm just saying it doesn't help.

The main topic of discussion this week in BrownsWorld will certainly concern the fate of Coach Mangini and his staff. And with good reason - there's precious little else to discuss, outside of perhaps Colt McCoy. Not to mention that the question of who should lead this team into the future is of vital importance to the franchise and the entire fan base.

As with many topics, the should-he-stay-or-should-he-go debate seems to have polarized into 2 opposite factions. There are those that think Eric Mangini is a fine coach that has instilled hard work and loyalty into this team, and is only a few talented players and a few years away from greatness. Any shortcomings can be blamed squarely on the players, and, with a few people, even the front office.

Then there are those that see nothing good in Eric Mangini. He can do nothing right - every decision he makes is the wrong one.

He is the football equivalent of the Antichrist to them, and his removal will finally set this franchise free.

As I've told you good people several times, my feelings about Mangini are somewhere in between. I like him. I think he's a decent coach. There are certainly other coaches around the league that I look at and say " *Dag, I'm glad we don't have THAT guy instead* ."

There are also other coaches around the league that I look at and say " *Dag, I wish we had THAT guy instead* ."

One individual asked me to stop skirting the issue and answer what I would do if I were Mike Holmgren. But the answer is this - I don't know what I'd do.

It's a really tough call for me. I think a lot of it depends on whom the potential replacement would be. If you said "*Would you fire Eric Mangini if you had X waiting in the wings?* ", then it would be easier for me to make that decision.

If X = Jeff Fisher, then yes.

If X = Marty Mornhinweg or Brad Childress, then no.

In the end, I'd try to make the decision easier on myself by sitting Mangini down and insisting he get a new Offensive Coordinator. Mangini's not an Offensive guy - he needs a good, strong, experienced OC in there to make that side of the ball less Neolithic.

And, being Mike Holmgren, I'd insist on having a big part in finding this person.

If Mangini refused, whether due to loyalty to Brian Daboll or his disdain over ceding any control in that area, I'd can him. It's not like he's irreplaceable. Quite the contrary.

If he agreed, then I'd keep him for one more year. It's not like he's a horrible coach, and with one more solid draft and a good OC, he might be able to take the team to the playoffs.

Besides, we've got a potential CBA mess coming up, so now isn't the ideal time to be making wholesale changes.

I am not - obviously - Mike Holmgren. My opinion - obviously - means nothing. I have no idea - obviously - what the real Mike Holmgren is thinking.

I think that now that he's seen this team play 14 games (and some from last year), he has a real sense of Mangini's style - and he doesn't like it. I think he's been thinking that he needs to get rid of Mangini for a while, and now Eric is making it easier on him with the late season meltdown.

We have to remember that Mangini is not Holmgren's "guy". He gave Eric another shot out the sympathy that he has for other coaches, a courtesy year, if you will.

But watching the way the Offense runs, Holmgren was probably looking for a reason to justify getting rid of him - even before this season began.

Mangini didn't have to just show improvement (how hard is it to "show improvement" over last year?), no he had to go out and grab the job by the balls.

And it looked like he might do it too... back-to-back wins over the Saints and Pats made everyone feel that this team was really going places.

Now? It looks like a fluke.

If I were to venture a guess... well, I think that Holmgren probably feels Daboll is an unmitigated disaster as Offensive Coordinator and that the whole team philosophy on that side of the ball needs to be overhauled. This is not a "tweak".

This is obviously "As of today". If the Browns go out and beat either the Steelers or Ravens - or both - that might change everything (then again, it might not). It would be hard to can a guy that ended the season by beating 2 playoff-bound divisional foes.

But, if the season DID end today, then, yeah... I think that Mangini would be toast.

_____

Game Recap

Despite looking a little rusty at the outset, Colt McCoy made a triumphant return on the first drive, leading the Browns on a 75 yard drive, capped by a gorgeous 20 yard TD pass to Robert Royal out of a unique formation of 2 bunches of 3 wideouts on either side (a couple of them John St. Clair and Joe Thomas). See that? You try something new, and sometimes it works.

Colt had one terrible pass on the drive that very well could've been returned for a Pick 6 if it hadn't been dropped (and if the Bengals hadn't hit him in the head, garnering a penalty), but, for the most part, the drive highlighted what the Browns have been missing under Jake Delhomme.

Browns 7, Bengals 0.

The Browns Defense, however, played lifelessly all ballgame, getting literally run over most of the day. The Bengals' first drive was halted on downs, but the next one was a shockingly easy 91 yard drive ended by an 18 yard Cedric Benson TD run. The Browns didn't give up any more TD's after that - but they sure had a hard time stopping Cincy outside of the Red Zone. ***Browns 7,***

Bengals 7.

The Bengals went on another long drive after a 3 and Out, this one resulting in a short FG and a 10-7 lead. Cleveland was moving the ball well and had 2nd and 4 at the Bengals 31 with 1:18 to play and all their Time Outs. But Colt got sacked, creating a 3rd and 12, and Eric Mangini opted to let the clock run down instead of calling Time.

McCoy completed a short pass to make it 4th and 7 with 16 seconds left, and the Browns got into formation to run another play.

It appeared they were trying to lure Cincy offsides so they could get 5 yards and attempt a FG, but it didn't work, so they finally took the Time Out.

They came back out to try the 4th Down play, but St. Clair false started and the Browns punted on 4th and 12 to end the Half.

Now, I've seen people lambasting this sequence of events as unexplainable and evidence of poor coaching. I don't see why this is confusing. The reasoning is clear: After Colt got sacked, Mangini didn't have enough confidence in his Offense to get the 1st Down, so he let the

clock run down so that if the Bengals did get the ball back, there wouldn't be much time left.

He was also probably hoping to get enough yardage on 3rd and 12 that they could kick a FG.

When their attempt to lure Cincy offsides didn't work, they took a Time Out to come up with an actual play on 4th and 7, one good enough to get a 1st Down so they could attempt a kick (since they were outside of Phil Dawson's range at that point). St. Clair blew it with his penalty, and Mangini didn't feel it was worth the risk to go for it on 4th and 12.

It makes perfect sense. Do I like the philosophy behind it? No. I don't think you throw in the towel and go for a FG just because it's 3rd and 12.

I don't like the brand of ultra-conservative decision making that Mangini's been bringing to the table ever since the Jets game.

But if that is your credo, then his actions were completely understandable.

Cincy tacked on 2 FG's to start the 2nd Half, extending their lead to 16-7. But Hillis finally got rolling, rushing for 32 yards on 5 carries on a drive mainly featuring him (mixed with some beautiful throws by Colt) down to the 5 yard line.

3rd and 1 at the 5.

Gee, I wonder what Daboll would call?

On the boards this week, I dubbed our Offensive Coordinator Brian "Predicable" Daboll, which Brian McPeek wisely turned into PredictDaboll - as fitting a nickname as I've ever seen. Predict Daboll naturally called for a run up the middle, because that's exactly what they were expecting, and he was creating a double bluff by surprising them and doing exactly what they thought he would.

Or something like that.

Obviously, it was stuffed.

So, on 4th and 1, down 9 points, unable to stop the Cincy run game (or pass game, for that matter) all day, Mangini opted to take the FG instead of try for the TD. If the D had been doing anything, I would've understood it.

Maybe not liked it, but understood it.

This... this I didn't understand.

Bengals 16, Browns 10.

Another long, time-consuming Bengal drive ensued, resulting in another FG and putting Cincy back up by 2 scores. After the Browns went 3 and Out, I pretty much gave up on the game. Th e Browns Defense put up a "magnificent" stand, though, "forcing" the Bengals to finally punt after "only" a 9 play, 4 1/2 minute, 30 yard drive.

With about 4 minutes left, Colt went crazy out of the shotgun, ending with him nailing Brian

Robiskie on a 46 yard TD pass.

The pass itself was perfect - it was high and over the Defender where only Robiskie could get it, and he made a very nice grab for about a 24 yard gain, then took it the other 22 himself.

Bengals 19, Browns 17.

With no faith in his Defense, Mangini decided to onside kick (which I thought was probably a smart move at that point - maybe he learned his lesson from not going for it on 4th and 1). Titus Brown appeared to come out of the pack with the ball, and the Browns even now maintain they don't know why they didn't get awarded the fumble (Phil Dawson said "
I'm not sure what happened there... I don't get it.
").

Let me explain it Phil - the replay showed that the Bengals Defender clearly recovered the ball and possessed it before going down - the play was over the second a Browns player touched him.

It doesn't matter if the ball came out in the scrum after that.

The refs made the right call.

Cleveland had one chance left - hold Cincy to a 3 and Out. They had the 2 minute warning and 2 Time Outs on their side. The Bengals predictably ran the ball to run clock, and, on 3rd and 3, with the whole world knowing they were going to run again, pounded out a final 1st Down to seal the win.

For the Browns, the losses just keep getting uglier.

Final: Bengals 19, Browns 17.

_____

Conclusion

Time of Possession: Cincinnati – 36:10, Cleveland – 21:57

Total Yards: Cincinnati – 397, Cleveland - 278

First Downs: Cincinnati - 22, Cleveland – 14

If you watched the Bills game last week, then you pretty much were treated to a carbon copy. The Offense was a little better against Cincy, but the Defense was a little worse.

Overall, they were thoroughly outplayed and pushed around.

There was no fight, no urgency, no physicality, and not much brain.

Since the apparently devastating loss to the Jets, this team has only received one good performance from one unit in one game since (and the clue is that it was the Defense in Miami with the candlestick). I don't even recognize this team any more, unless the first half of the season was the mirage and these are true colors.

The type of fire and power that the Browns demonstrated in their 4 game end to the 2009 season seems to have been reversed. The 4 game stretch of games that saved Mangini's job last year might just kill it this year.

_____

Gameballs

TJ Ward – And guess who led the Defense in tackles again? Not to mention a couple nice plays on the ball. At this point, you're probably talking about him as the Browns' Defensive MVP.

Brian Robiskie - Don't go lookin' for me to give him a lot of these, but when you're the 36th pick of the draft and you've only played 30 games and you've already got your first TD... well, that's just special, right there.

_____

Honorable Mention

Colt McCoy – His 132.6 QB rating is gaudy, and he made some really nice throws. His two deep balls... well, those weren't things of beauty, but those passes can be underthrown on purpose, and the WR is supposed to have a decided advantage making an adjustment on the ball (like Robiskie did).

However, I'm still cautious about this guy.

I was much higher on him earlier in the season when he looked sharper - although I must hurriedly admit that his ankle injury is probably hurting his mobility and delivery, which would explain why his last two games were his least impressive.

Still a lot to like about this guy.

Ben Watson – Offensive MVP Runner-Up.

Robert Royal – I was sure you were gonna drop that TD pass. Good for you, Royal, good for you.

_____

Wall of Shame

John St. Clair - This is another guy whose starting role mystifies me. Is Shawn Lauvao so bad that he plays RG worse than St. Clair plays RT?

Because Floyd Womack is a much better Right Tackle than this dude.

Josh Cribbs - I'm sure a lot of the problem is the fact that he's playing on 4 dislocated toes. But right now, he's pretty much useless out there.

IR the poor guy and get someone back there that can make a cut.

Eric Mangini - You picked a really bad time to have that kind of game.

Rob Ryan - Not only did your D get treated like someone's biz-natch, but you got the ultimate humiliation of having Mangini take play calling away from you. Nice.

Run D - Pushed 5 yards down the field on pretty much every play, just like last week.

Defensive Inconsistency - What kind of D is this? Is it the prowling Amoeba D we saw in the 2 impressive wins? Or the standard D that we've seen the last couple weeks?

Are they an opportunist D that forces 7 turnovers?

Or one that plays it safe and sits back and is not aggressive at all?

They stuff the run one week, then get plowed under the next.

I have no idea what to expect from this unit.

Offensive Line - What the hell, people?

What do you do with a power running team that can't run? I guess you have to adjust.

What do you do with an Offense that can't adjust? Watch the last 5 games if you want to know.

And, no, I don't care that the Browns were lucky enough to win 2 of those...

After reading my last article and its request that Brian Daboll be removed from his position, some people (not many, but some) came to his defense.

The argument? Daboll's not the problem - he doesn't have anything to work with. The WR's suck, the right side of the OL is in flux, and Jake Delhomme isn't very good.

While I don't discount that, or the concept that Daboll might be just fine with a HOF QB and a studs at every Offensive position, what that tells me is that Daboll needs the situation to be optimal in order to succeed.

That if he is given mediocre talent, he's simply not good enough to get it done.

I will use this example as context: Peyton Manning right now is playing with backups and 3rd stringers at several WR positions, at RB, and at TE. This is not an optimal situation for him, and his production is somewhat off because of it.

He's still throwing for over 4000 yards and getting plenty of TD's, but his INT's are up and the team is a mere 8-6.

However, even with all those injuries, even with the mediocrity of the talent, he's still making do the best he can and squeezing decent production out of what he's got and has his team tied for first. That's what great QB's do.

Imagine if Indy was starting a mediocre QB. Imagine if Peyton Manning was gone, and Trent Dilfer was in his place. Dilfer, a mediocre QB, would struggle mightily, and without the supporting cast there to "carry him" to competency (like the 2000 Ravens D did), he would fail.

Brian Daboll is the Trent Dilfer of Offensive Coordinators.

What this team needs (what any team would prefer) is something closer to Peyton Manning. Peyton Mannings are hard to find, so you can't really *demand* that the OC be THAT good, but you should demand that he be better than Trent Dilfer.

You don't keep propping Daboll up with the idea that he'll be "good enough" if you just surround him with enough talent. What you do is continue to upgrade the talent while still trying to upgrade the Offensive Coordinator position.

And I'm damn tired of the excuse-laden apologist argument that "*Until you improve X, it doesn't matter who the Y is*." Such as "*Until you improve the Wide Receivers, it doesn't matter who the Quarterback is*."

Or "*Until you improve the overall talent, it doesn't matter who the Coach is*."

Yes, it does. You want each and every position - player or coach or front office - to be filled with the best person available. Not improving a position until some other position is improved is just idiocy. If you can make an upgrade at any position, you do it.

Think of the coaching staff like players - if you can upgrade there, you do it, even if other positions need upgraded too.

_____

Someone had the nerve to argue to me the other day that the recent team nosedive was due to Holmgren, because he was "putting too much pressure" on Mangini & Daboll, and was "hoping" they would fail.

I don't know about "hoping", but even if Holmgren was, I don't care.

Too much pressure? Surely, you can't be serious (and don't call me Shirley).

Do you imagine for one second that the job of Head Coach in the NFL isn't one of the most pressure-packed jobs on the planet? What do you think that 3 hours every Sunday is, a freakin' picnic? The press, the owner, the players, the fans, the opponent... I mean, how many stress factors do you want me to name?

Why would you want a Coach that can't handle pressure?

So if Eric Mangini and Brian Daboll (and Rob Ryan, for that matter) aren't getting it done because they're under "too much pressure", then you've just made a stronger argument to boot 'em than I ever could.

_____

Since starting 1-5, the Browns have gone Win 2, Lose 2, Win 2, Lose 2. Now, if we follow the pattern, that means that they should sweep the next 2 games against Baltimore and Pittsburgh.

Make sure you rush that info off to Vegas while you still can.

_____

Scott Fujita was placed on IR this week, which is a bit of surprise. One must assume that his knee wasn't healing as quickly as anticipated, since he was only supposed to be out about 4 weeks, and he was injured in the Jets game (Week 10).

This is a dire loss to a unit (Run Defense) that has been reeling pretty much since the moment he left the field. Hopefully he returns with the same quality next year, because I think it is clear that Mr. Fujita was a strong Free Agent pickup by Tom Heckert.

_____

And all of you looking for a little ray of sunshine on this miserable gray day... the Browns play the NFC West next year.

_____

I know that he played OK on Sunday, but Mike Shanahan benched Donovan McNabb for... Rex Grossman? THE Rex Grossman? Really? Rex Grossman? Rex freakin' Grossman? Are you kiddin' me?

Somebody somewhere has some pictures of someone.

_____

Next Up

Baltimore Ravens (10-4).

There's no real reason to delve into the intricate intricacies of the Baltimore Ravens. We see them twice a year, we see them on nationally televised games, we know them well.

That's the only real reason that I think this game will be closer than advertised. That, and the idea that Mangini might really be coaching for his job at this point, and the players have some pride and play up to better opponents.

In the end, however, the Ravens are just a better team. At pretty much every spot. And they're playing for their playoff lives too, not to mention the possibility of a Division title.

Do the coaches of the respective teams both have an equal amount on the line?

You betcha.

Do the players have the same amount on the line?

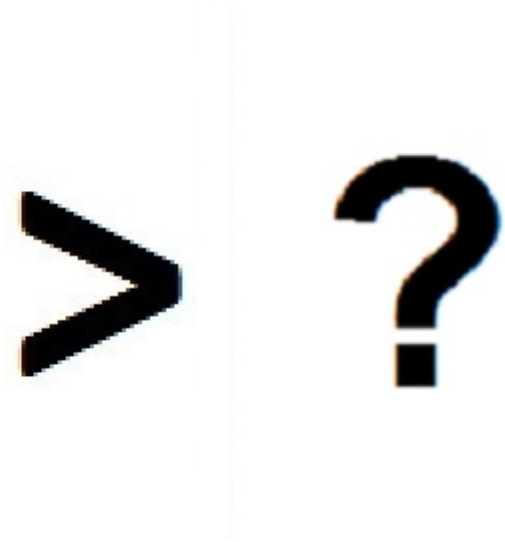
Noooooooo.

Ravens 27, Browns 17.

_____

Person I Like Aaron Goldhammer More Than

No One

In the spirit of Christmas and the holiday season, I will take a break from hating on people/things for this week. This is not the time of year for spiteful sarcasm, and I shall refrain altogether.

So, for this week, and this week alone, I hereby declare that there is no one that I dislike more than Aaron Goldhammer.