Cleveland Browns president Mike Holmgren today reached the only decision he could regarding Eric Mangini. He made the second year coach a two-time former head coach, saying, essentially, that improvement was fine but Mangini wasn't building a program Holmgren felt could compete for championships.

Given that the Browns were 5-11 for the last two seasons, it's hard to argue that point.

The case for firing Mangini was made a little more difficult this past season because in many, many ways the team improved. Unquestionably the players stayed competitive until Mangin's status was a fait accompli, which meant the Pittsburgh game.

But playing competitive football, even if it is the first step of the process, was never going to be good enough for Holmgren. He's used to winning and that's exactly what this team didn't do. And if the Browns were on an upswing following four improbable victories at season's end last year, the franchise is on as big of downswing following four rather predictable losses at season's end this year. There's a lot of mess that needs to get cleaned up, again.

Making the case for keeping Mangini was always going to be hard except for the hard core deniers who refused to see any flaw despite how much those flaws stuck out like cuts on the chin from a dull razor. The offense was turgid. The clock management was often horrendous. Game time decisions often made little sense and on and on and on. But to the hard core those were minor blips on what they thought was a gilded road to franchise salvation.

Maybe they'll have to find another franchise to support as protest but if past is prologue, they'll be back in the fold soon enough. That's just how this dysfunctional Cleveland Browns family that we all love operates.

Exactly where it all fell apart for Mangini is not actually hard to pinpoint. In the first instance, he never should have been hired. Owner Randy Lerner, knowing as much about the operations of professional football as a typical casual fan, took it upon himself to conduct the search for the successor of Romeo Crennel. Lerner had one criterion and only one criterion: the new hire had to have head coaching experience.

When the New York Jets fired Mangini after three very mediocre years, Lerner saw opportunity where others only saw flaws. No doubt Mangini wowed Lerner with his football knowledge. Nobody ever accused Mangini of being a football dimwit. And with no other due diligence except that interview, Lerner hired Mangini for the Cleveland gig before Mangini had even a spare moment to consider why he failed in New York in the first place.

To Mangini, that abrupt hiring served only to validate that he was on the right road for the Jets. He failed to internalize any of his own failings and brought heavy baggage with him to Cleveland. He came in and expected to be treated by the media, the fans and the players as if he had already won 3 Super Bowls. His missteps in that department are well chronicled.

That hubris led to an absolutely miserable 1-11 start that nearly got him fired before the season ended. It did get him a new boss in Holmgren. If Mangini's tenure wasn't doomed from the moment he was hired or even from the attitude he copped or even the draft he bungled, then it was certainly doomed from the moment Holmgren was hired because, as Lerner said, he needed a credible voice in the organization. Ouch.

From there it really is worth wondering whether Holmgren ever saw Mangini as a long term solution anyway. There was never any loud or public display of confidence in his coach. Instead there were mostly cryptic signs, like Holmgren's midseason musings about just what the hell the offense was trying to do and his stated desire to get back into coaching.

It may be true that Holmgren had a sincere desire to see Mangini succeed but I doubt it. More probably Holmgren just couldn't see himself pulling the plug on Mangini's star crossed career so soon after he was hired by Lerner to fix this mess.

In that context, it's doubtful that anything short of the playoffs would have brought Mangini back anyway. As it was all those four victories did at the end of last season was delay for still another season the real development of this franchise or the development that Holmgren envisions anyway.

Imagine then how anyone who bought a ticket for this past season must feel knowing that in large measure it was all just a waste of everyone's time. The Browns weren't building toward anything meaningful and instead were just in their usual state of arrested development. Maybe the Browns will consider giving anyone who bought a ticket their money back, with interest, but I doubt it.

With Mangini heading to wherever the next opportunity takes him and the Browns further burdening a shrinking revenue pool by paying off still another former head coach, all eyes will turn to the question of whether Holmgren sees himself as the worthy successor to a tradition that has been nearly forgotten. There was a time when the Browns were a proud franchise that stood for everything that was right about the NFL. At the moment and for at least the last generation, the Browns are the NFL's equivalent of the Los Angeles Clippers; a laughing stock franchise with a curious owner and a revolving door leading into the head coach's office.

There will be the inevitable press conference in which Holmgren will take on all questions, thank Mangini for his service (as he did in the press release) and then tease us about his plans for the next coach. For once, though, it would be nice to see someone associated with this franchise actually take a moment to think about the next move. As we saw with Mangini, haste indeed makes waste.