If there is anything about the recent firing of Cleveland Browns' head coach Eric Mangini that is surprising it is the number of people who feel that club president Mike Holmgren made the worst decision possible. Other than perhaps the Mrs., no one was much complaining when Romeo Crennel was fired and it's hard to see how the situations are all that much different.

Both boil down to the same thing: neither had the ability to get this team to a satisfactory level.

Right now those that are complaining are doing so in the context of a moribund franchise left for dead that appeared after all these years to have a few breaths of life in it. Mangini was responsible for that, no doubt. But let's face it; the franchise is still barely breathing and Mangini, like Crennel, lacked the skills necessary to get it fully upright and moving in the direction of a Super Bowl title, which is the only criterion fans should be settling for at the moment.

It's all well and good that Mangini cleaned up some messes, got the players to like him and had them playing far more competitively than Crennel did (except for the year when Crennel went 10-6 and didn't make the playoffs). But plucking every piece of fruit lying on or close to the ground doesn't automatically qualify one to climb to the highest branches.

Holmgren, who does know a thing or two about the game, felt that Mangini wasn't that kind of coach and made the change. Why is that a problem? Why do the Mangini defenders assume their curbside views fashioned from a life outside of football make them automatically more qualified than Holmgren, informed by a life inside of football, to reach that conclusion?

There are a number of arguments that Mangini's staunchest defenders advance and most of them are as thin as Mangini's resume. But the one argument worth considering is that the lack of continuity is what is hurting this franchise the most and if for no other reason that's why Holmgren should have stuck it out with Mangini.

If there is one thing that Browns fans have learned the hard way is that the lack of continuity in this franchise has made it nearly impossible to be successful. With two notable exceptions, a unifying figure in the front office and/or on the field is the one thread weaving through every successful franchise and the lack of that figure is the one thread weaving through every moribund franchise.

The notable exceptions though demonstrate the pitfalls of continuity for continuity's sake.

Consider the Cincinnati Bengals. Marvin Lewis just re-signed with the Bengals and will now be entering into his 9th season with the team, making him the longest tenured coach in Bengals' history.

Per the wire service reports owner Mike Brown said "we are close to being the kind of team we can be. I think continuity will give us the best shot at becoming that team. We have a good relationship, Marvin and I. We work well together. It isn't an easy relationship, but it's a good one."

What's interesting about Brown's striking a blow for continuity is that Lewis hasn't been a particularly good or particularly successful head coach. He's 9 games under .500 for his career and has just two winning season, both of which resulted in short-lived playoff appearances.

Lewis comes from the Romeo Crennel school of discipline as Lewis' tenure has been defined in

large part by the number of miscreants on his rosters. No other coach in the league has had as many players get arrested as Lewis. It may not have been Lewis' idea to bring in those kinds of players, but he never took a public stand against them, either. The late Chris Henry should have never been allowed back in the league but Lewis took on the problem anyway.

But it's more than that. The Bengals may have been among the most talented teams in the NFL this year, at least on paper. They were certainly far more talented, again on paper, than the Browns. And yet Lewis managed to squeeze a 4-12 record out of them with a franchise record 10-game losing streak.

Consider, too, Carson Palmer's startling lack of development. Palmer certainly has his moments and he's also had injury problems, but he is not the player he should be at this point in his career.

The bottom line on Lewis is that same as Mangini. For whatever else their merits might be, neither is going to get a team to the league's highest levels. Keeping Lewis in Cincinnati may be good for continuity but it won't do anything for improving their win total significantly.

The other example is the Oakland Raiders. There is no personality in the league larger than owner Al Davis or who has been around longer. He's as hands on as any owner in the history of the game. Others may have held the title but there is no question that Davis serves as the general manager of his club. Davis certainly has a vision of the Raider way and certainly understands what he's trying to build.

The problem, of course, is that the Raiders have been unstable for the last two decades. They've had only 7 winning seasons in the last 22 years and Davis has hired and fired 11 coaches in that time period.

But are they unstable because Davis doesn't understand the value of continuity? Doubtful. He had John Madden as his head coach for 9 season and Tom Flores for 9 more after that. The Raiders have been unstable because Davis hasn't landed on a coach he can live with. You can argue that perhaps some of the firings were a mistake, like Jon Gruden. But that's not the point. What matters for this purpose is to understand that continuity makes sense but only when there is a reason for it.

No one will much argue that firing coaches like Norv Turner (struggling as usual in San Diego), Joe Bugle, Mike White, Art Shell or Tom Cable were a mistake. None of them were ever going to lead that franchise to the Super Bowl. Even Bill Callahan, who did lead the team to the Super Bowl, has more than proven since that he is not an elite head coach.

The point is that there are two franchises (a third if you count San Diego and their dogged insistence on marching Turner out there week after week), Cincinnati and Oakland, that understand the value of continuity but haven't been able to make it work for them and won't until there is a compelling reason to adhere to that principle.

That gets us back to Mangini. The real question on his continued status in my mind came down to whether or not there was a legitimate reason to believe that he was a "franchise" coach, someone who would lead this team to the Promised Land. A franchise coach can come in any form but he has to have a certain "it" factor that Mangini just doesn't possess.

There's no bigger jerk in the NFL than Belichick but to deny he has the "it" factor is to deny science. This isn't to say that Mangini isn't a credible head coach or that he's without merit. But it is to say that Mangini is a mostly generic coach, easily replaced by someone who could accomplish the same things as he's accomplished.

What Holmgren needs to do is find that franchise coach and he knows it. They are out there but they aren't easy to find and even when you can find them it doesn't mean they want to be part of what your team is all about. And while the odds are always going to be stacked against finding the needle amongst all that hay, it's far more palatable for Holmgren to go on that search then to just throw up his hands to the God of Continuity and continue and experiment with Mangini that he already was convinced would fail.