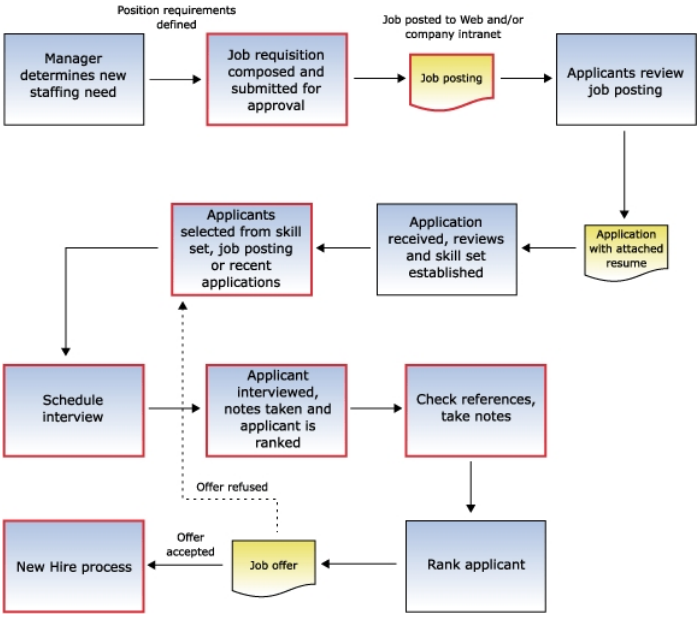

As the Cleveland Browns go about the real work of putting together a football team, the hand wringing already has begun. Some fans and some in the local media are getting breathless with worry over the coordinators the Browns haven't been able to hire.

In Thursday's Plain Dealer for example Mary Kay Cabot implied that the Browns already are working on what amounts to their third choice as the offensive coordinator after Mike McCoy opted to stay with Denver and Bill Musgrave opted to take a job with the Minnesota Vikings. In that way Cabot already sets up new head coach Pat Shurmur and club president Mike Holmgren for failure because, after all, how good can anyone's third choice for an open position really be?

Well, to answer that question is to buy into a premise based on anecdotal evidence disguised as fact.

Three weeks ago neither Cabot nor fans who are kvetching could pick McCoy or Musgrave out of a lineup. They wouldn't have been able to hazard a guess about their offensive philosophies, their coaching histories (without consulting Wikipedia) or whether or not they are even good coaches. That either or both would be considered superior choices to anyone else would have been unfathomable. So it seems rather meaningless to bracket the discussion in the context that these two were somehow among the top coordinators in the league and the Browns have missed out and will suffer for it.

Next, there is absolutely no evidence that either McCoy or Musgrave were their number one and two choices or that, indeed, either one actually turned down the Browns. McCoy was under contract with Denver already and the new head coach, John Fox, opted to keep McCoy mainly because of his long association with him from his days in Carolina. There is a devil you know factor at work for anyone contemplating a job change.

As for Musgrave, we know he was interviewed but we don't know whether or not he was ever offered the job. If anything there is more reason to believe that he wasn't offered the job than there is that he was and that he spurned the Browns for the Vikings.

When hiring for this type of job there is a built in assumption that the person being interviewed already is qualified. Professional sports teams, like virtually any other employer, doesn't waste time conducting fishing expeditions for high level hires. These aren't mail order hires. Instead, the focus of these interviews is culture. What the interviewer is trying to discern is how well he and the prospect can work together. In this case do they share a similar vision on offensive approach? Do they have similar views on how various situations are handled?

It could very well be that in the course of their interviews it became clear to Shurmur and/or Musgrave that they were on different pages. That doesn't mean one is right and one is wrong. It just means that the fit didn't seem right to one or both of them. Far better to realize that now than 14 games into next season.

Another element in the search in this case is the simple fact that Shurmur was hired because of his own offensive expertise and thus what he might be requiring of an offensive coordinator is likely to be much different than what a more defensive minded head coach, like Leslie Frazier in Minnesota, might want. Shurmur isn't trying to find someone to flesh out a vague sense of how he feels an offense should work. Shurmur's trying to find a coordinator who can bring some additional value to the approach he's already adopted.

Shurmur already has said that he intends to call the offensive plays. That right there is a limiting factor to many prospective coordinator candidates and likely was to someone like Musgrave and maybe even McCoy. Calling the plays is considered the glamour part of the coordinator job and to know going in that you won't be in charge of that would certainly be seen as a negative by many candidates.

Again, that doesn't mean either Shurmur or Musgrave is wrong. It's just that they are going in different directions.

Let's also throw out the notion that underlying the intense focus at the moment on the hiring of offensive and defensive coordinators is the overemphasis by the fans on these coaches' roles. Brian Daboll, the Browns' former offensive coordinator, was hired for that same role in Miami. That had to qualify as a mini-shock to most Browns' fans but it actually just illustrates the point that the role of the coordinator is often misunderstood.

What Browns fans won't know until they watch Daboll work in Miami is how hamstrung Daboll might have been in Cleveland by the views of his boss, Eric Mangini, and the limited talent the Browns had at the skill positions. I don't know that Lindy Infante could have done any better given the tools that Daboll had to work with or the approach that Mangini espoused.

The other thing about the Daboll/Mangini dynamic was the overriding sense you got each week that the two were never really on the same page. It wasn't any one thing that either of them said but more a collection of statements and gestures over time. One of the abiding mysteries of this last season was why, after all the preseason talk, you rarely saw Seneca Wallace and Josh Cribbs on the field at the same time.

It's pretty likely that Daboll was fostering that kind of talk. Frankly, that's the kind of thing any offensive coordinator dreams of, the next great innovation. It's also pretty likely that it was Mangini that ultimately shut it down. Mangini may like the occasional gimmick, but he's vanilla in his overall approach which is why the Browns' offense ended up being vanilla in its approach. Hold on to the ball as long as possible and get whatever points might be there. Take as few chances as possible and take the points. Always take the points.

In a different setting Daboll may very well thrive. If he's more attuned to his head coach and has the talent to execute his schemes he'll justify the confidence the Dolphins have in him. That won't make the case that the Browns should have kept him but it will make the case that the best coordinator for any team is one who works well with the head coach.

Thus all we really know is that whoever is hired as offensive coordinator won't necessarily have been Shurmur's third or fourth choice but the person who engendered the best vibe for the

rookie head coach.

The far more interesting hire for Shurmur will be on the defensive side of the ball. Other than a general notion that he prefers the 4-3 defense, Shurmur is mostly putting the fate of the defense in the hands of his coordinator. That's why it's not surprise that he's looking for deep experience on that side of the ball, far more than he's looking for in an offensive coordinator.

There's no question that the assistants Shurmur hires will have a significant impact on the success or failure of this team. But that success or failure won't be the result of Shurmur having hired a suddenly "hot" assistant. The real trick and the real measure of whether Shurmur will be successful will come if he hires assistants that share his vision. It seems like such a simple task but so much of the Browns' failures for so long as been the abject inability to execute on just this task.