When it comes to the NFL, the only thing Cleveland Browns fans want to worry about is whether or not this team will ever win more than 5 games in a season again. But if you want a fun NFL-related distraction that is more competitive than the Browns have been in years, keep watch on the battle royale shaping up between NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and NFLPA executive director DeMaurice Smith.

Smith has made almost a cottage industry out of trying to reshape the image of Goodell from guardian of the game to a power hungry dictator more concerned with his stature then the welfare of the game or its players. Goodell for his part treats Smith like the pest that he is.

Smith's strategy was borne from the moment he ran for and won his current role following the death of the previous executive director, Gene Upshaw. Smith took a strident approach to his campaign by implying not all the subtly that Upshaw's relationship with Paul Tagliabue was bad for the players, never mind that Upshaw and Tagliabue presided over the greatest expansion of wealth ever of their sport.

Smith took this approach because he knew that new commissioner Goodell has won his job by reflecting the desires of a strong and vocal group of owners who felt about Tagliabue like some players felt about Upshaw—that he was selling them out. When Tagliabue pushed a settlement of the previous collective bargaining agreement on the owners, there were many that felt he went to far in terms of the guarantees that went to players.

It was hardly a secret that the owners wanted to blow up the last agreement as soon as it was legally possible and reclaim their economic footing. The recession of 2008 helped their argument.

So it made sense for Smith to play to the fears of the players that Goodell was nothing more than a bag man for the likes of Jerry Jones in Dallas and that strong, strident, combative leadership was needed as a counterbalance.

Most players are about as vested in the inner workings of their union as you'd expect, meaning not much at all. In truth, most would prefer not to have their paychecks lightened by union dues. But they'll go along to get along and so when Smith's siren song found voice with the few who pay attention, his hiring was almost a foregone conclusion. I wonder, though, if anyone ever checked his resume. Smith had absolutely no labor experience when he got his job and then went about proving how disastrous that could be.

The owners weren't exactly private about their intentions with respect to getting out of the last labor agreement and Smith wasn't exactly private about what he was going to do in response. Relying on his training as a trial lawyer and his lack of experience as a labor lawyer, Smith turned to litigation to get his way. It didn't work.

Smith seemed to be under the impression that he could get the courts to stop the owners from not just exercising their legal right to get out of the contract, but also get them to force new terms and conditions on the owners that they wouldn't want to accept. It was always going to fail.

Labor laws strike a decent balance between the workers and the owners in virtually all industries. Those laws certainly provide needed protections to workers who ban together to bargain collectively (as well as needed protections to help them ban together in the first place). But they also acknowledge that business owners are the ones at risk and thus don't require those owners to agree to any particular proposal put forth. Both sides have the legal right to ask for anything and both sides have the same right to always say no as long as all of this is done in good faith.

The owners had, in their view, plenty of economic incentive behind their proposals. It could hardly be said they weren't made in good faith. The players had good faith reasons for saying no. Eventually though the only place this could ever get settled was the bargaining table and not in court. No court or administrative agency can dictate the terms of anyone's labor contract, simple as that.

Smith's pushing the union into a legal battle delayed bargaining for months without meaningfully increasingly the union's leverage. The owners were willing to lose the season if necessary to take back control of their economic future and the players, whose careers are fleeting, were always going to cave. A more reasoned leader would have seen this from the outset and set about to find the best bargain available in a bad situation. As it turns out, the deal Smith did sign was not appreciably different or better then what he could have had before he let his members get locked out.

So Smith has been smarting from this embarrassment ever since and has gone after Goodell at every turn. Hardly a day goes by when the NFLPA isn't challenging one issue or another or reneging on one agreement or another.

Consider, three recent examples.

First, Smith agreed to HGH testing in the latest collective bargaining agreement and has since been walking back that commitment and it still isn't resolved.

Second, the owners voted to make it mandatory that all players wear thigh and knee pads, which is well within their rights to unilaterally make that call under the collective bargaining agreement. It shouldn't be particularly controversial given all the attention that player safety is getting these days. Not surprisingly the union is contesting the owners' right to force players to wear this protection. Remind me again who cares more about safety?

Third, the union filed a complaint this week alleging collusion by the owners in the uncapped 2010 season. Whatever claim the union had over that matter they waived when they signed the new collective bargaining agreement. Both sides waived all claims, known and unknown, that either had or could have had about any issues under the old collective bargaining agreement, the uncapped year, or the negotiations for a new agreement. Despite this waiver, which Smith signed, he's suing anyway buttressed by a failed legal strategy which depends on the union's direct disavowal of the agreement it signed—again.

In each case, and irrespective of what the NFLPA might say publicly, these actions are about

Smith trying to build his stature on the back of Goodell. A more reasoned leader would find a more reasoned approach but that hasn't been Smith's style.

The owners and the players are under a long term labor contract at the moment so an all out labor war isn't in the offing. But these constant firefights aren't helping the game and they aren't helping the players. They aren't even helping Smith. The union should have strong leadership. Goodell does need a foil and a counterbalance. But Smith at the moment isn't helping his stature or the union's by constantly reneging on the agreements he's signed.

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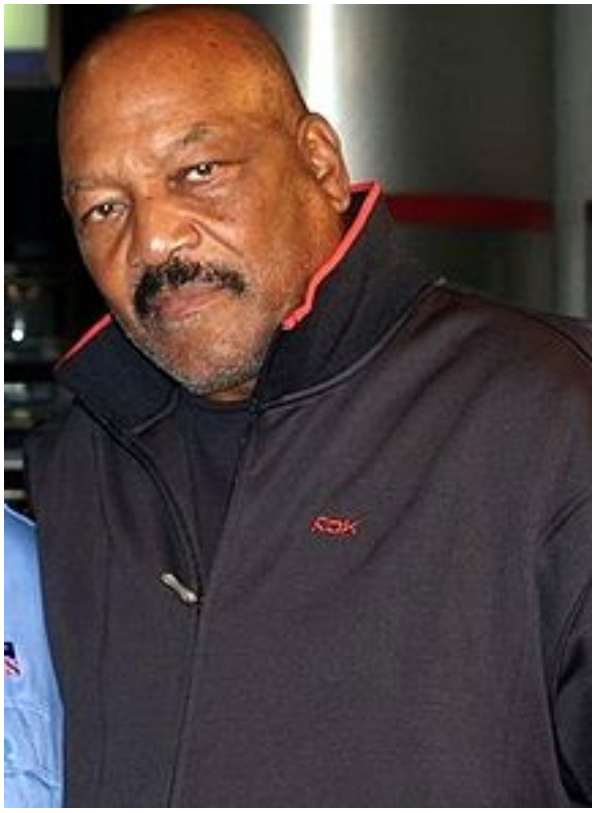
When did Jim Brown turn into Bob Feller?

People who never saw Feller pitch tend to know about him through old photos and newsreels or, prior to his death, from his gig as a so-called goodwill ambassador for the Indians. He pull on a uniform occasionally and throw the ball around. He'd also wax cranky on just about everything and everyone. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that the cartoon character Crankshaft was based on Feller.

But Feller had a certain charm anyway. Jim Brown? Not so much.

Arguably the greatest running back ever and certainly the best player to ever play for the Browns, Jim Brown used to serve the role with the Browns that Feller did with the Indians. But then Mike Holmgren was hired and for reasons that have never been explained, adequately or otherwise, Holmgren jettisoned Brown and his $500,000 salary from the Stadium while owner Randy Lerner wasn't looking.

Since that parting, Brown has turned into the cranky old guy. He raised a few eyebrows when the Browns drafted Trent Richardson by calling Richardson ordinary. And he still tweaking his old employer, Richardson and Holmgren, per an interview Tony Grossi conducted with him recently for ESPN Cleveland.

Brown stuck by his assessment of Richardson, calling him efficient. Brown just doesn't see greatness. Fair enough since Richardson hasn't even played a down in the NFL. But Brown did take another shot at Holmgren. He said the Browns are still a mess and it is due in large part to what he feels is Holmgren's lack of commitment to the team or the area.

Brown certainly is coming across as embittered. Losing a half million dollar salary will do that to a guy. But it's not as if Brown's comments lack a basis.

He explained in detail why he feels Richardson is ordinary, mainly due to what Brown feels is a lack of speed and quickness. Brown says Richardson has the opportunity to be a good workhorse type back but fans shouldn't be expecting the second coming of Emmitt Smith. On Holmgren, Brown rightfully points out his penchant for giving revealing interviews to Seattle radio stations while being mostly invisible to the Cleveland media.

The Browns have been a strange organization for so long that it's hard to tell what Holmgren is causing vs. what Holmgren is continuing. But alienating Brown was one of Holmgren's dumbest ideas. Maybe it was a money saver but that probably wouldn't have been necessary if Holmgren has not exercised his dumbest decision to date, wasting a year in this franchise's life by keeping Eric Mangini around for another year.

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There seems to be a growing consensus that Browns head coach Pat Shurmur isn't very good at his job, based mostly on the team's performance last season.

It's an unfair conclusion to draw.

Shurmur was hamstrung from the moment he got the job. First, he was hired a year too late because of Holmgren's aforesaid dumb idea of retaining Mangini and his system for an extra year. Then Shurmur was hamstrung by the NFL's labor situation which prevented him from having any contact with any players in the off season. That set Shurmur back and set the players back. At most, the offensive scheme he was implementing wasn't fully in place until late in the season.

Finally, Shurmur was handcuffed by the front office's refusal to provide Shurmur with one credible receiver, which is a kind of important position in the West Coast offense. Sure, they drafted Greg Little, but he hadn't even played in a year and when drafted he was immediately their best threat. That's how bad it was.

Shurmur's now had a full off season. The front office still hasn't helped him by again refusing to provide him with credible receivers, but at least he now has a good running back and a quarterback in whom he's more fully vested. This doesn't represent a make or break year by any means for Shurmur but it will tell us far more about what kind of head coach he might ultimately be.

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The Indians' sweep of the Tigers leads to this week's question to ponder: What's more surprising, the play of the Indians or the play of the Tigers?