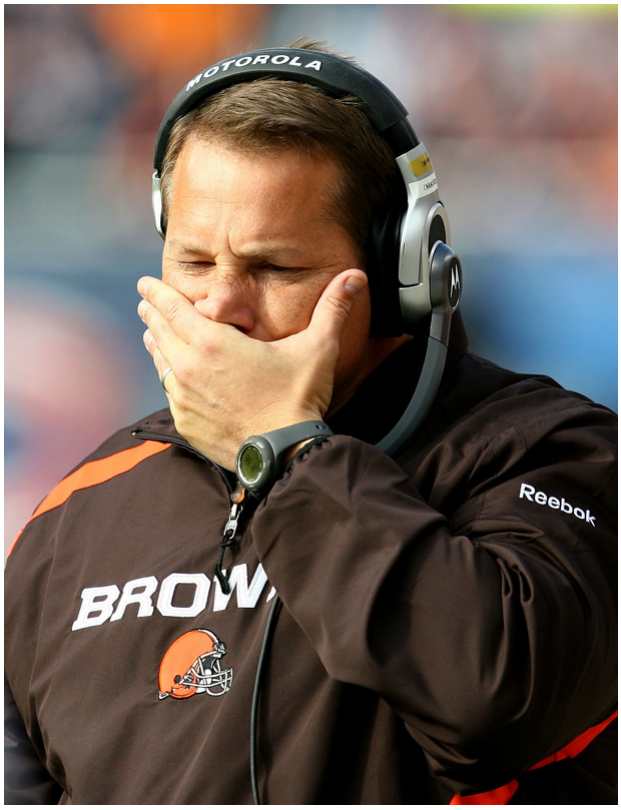
On Wednesday, Eric Mangini threw himself on a cross of sorts by essentially admitting that he was wrong for suggesting that the Detroit Lions were deliberately faking injuries to slow down the machine that is these Browns. He didn't say it that neatly or cleanly, of course. He's Mangini after all. Everything comes with a qualifier and this time it supposedly was the frustration of losing coming through. Gary Benz has a couple theories as to why Mangini reversed course on his public throw-down on the Lions ... and he shares them with our readers in his latest.



Is someone in Berea finally paying attention? Maybe. Maybe not.

A few weeks ago (or maybe just a few columns ago, hard to remember when it comes to Team Drama and its plucky head coach Eric "Sue Sylvester" Mangini--and if you don't get that reference then you haven't been tuning into Fox's show *Glee* but you should) I wrote that owner Randy Lerner was doing a perfectly miserable job at managing the Cleveland Browns' brand because of a depleted and overworked public relations staff. Maybe the tide is starting to turn.

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neatly or cleanly, of course. He's Mangini after all. Everything comes with a qualifier and this time it supposedly was the frustration of losing coming through. And in case you're wondering, no his original statement didn't come in the heated moments just after the game ended and yes they came a full day later.

Still, it represented the high water mark for the beleaguered public relations staff of the Browns. When you have a "client" like Mangini, a control freak with an alarming commitment to his own instincts and a simultaneous disdain for those of others, getting him to admit anything at all that signifies weakness or wrongness more or less constitutes one of the few victories of the season.

Just don't believe it. Don't believe it for a minute. The comments directed toward what is certainly a former friend in Lions head coach Jim Schwartz were the product of calculation not frustration. Mangini holds himself accountable to no one or nothing. If he were a company, his mission statement would read "I'm right, you're wrong, get out of my face."

There are at least two theories as to why Mangini reversed course on his public throw-down on the Lions. First, it could be that someone from the public relations staff grew a paid and clued him into the notion that he sounded like a whiner. An alpha male like Mangini can't afford to let anyone see him sweat, the theory goes, and thus anything that made him look less manly had to be corrected, quickly. If that's the case, kudos to the miserable wretch in the public relations department that drew that short straw. I hope your resume is up to date.

The second theory, and the one I subscribe to, is that Lerner put him up to it. It's really the same thing Lerner did to Phil Savage last year after dropping an F-bomb to an emailer after the Buffalo game. You could almost see the gun being pointed at Savage's head as he made his mea culpa, like a hostage being forced by his captors to film a propaganda statement. The same is true for Mangini. But given his acting experience on The Sopranos, which consisted of him eating pasta and smiling like a loon, he pulled it off much better. At least he didn't look like he was being forced to go to church, like Savage did.

But maybe there really is a third theory, the one in which Mangini has a rare moment of self-awareness and accountability. It would be nice to think that this was the case. Nice, but this isn't Fantasy Island. See, the problem with Mangini's complaining about the Lions has nothing to do with the fact that it made him look like an ass. It had everything to do with the fact that his players picked up on it and carried forward with it.

Pretty soon, the common theme among any player interviewed was that "geez, it sure as heck looked like a lot of injuries were happening at just the right time, just as we were really starting to find our groove" or something like that. From a player's perspective, then, the loss had little to do with them and far more to do with the dirty, low down, underhanded tricks foisted on them by those wascally wabbits in Detroit.

The first thing that a professional athlete wants and the last thing he needs is someone else to blame for his shortcomings. Watch a professional golfer miss a two foot putt and then walk toward the cup and tap down a make believe spike mark. It's far easier to blame the miss on a spike mark then nerves.

Athletes like to talk about accountability as if it is the highest order of existence but shy away from it like a teenager avoiding a kiss from his grandmother on the holidays. When Mangini put the notion out there publicly that the Browns didn't lose the game because of dropped touchdown passes or an inability to stop a rookie quarterback for one of the league's worst teams from moving 88 yards in less than two minutes with no time outs, it gave the players all the cover they needed to avoid what really should have been a teaching moment. And this team needs all the teaching moments it can get.

It speaks, really, to the larger issues plaguing this franchise, issues that go well beyond Mangini.

For too long under the combined Lerner ownership this franchise has suffered

from an abject lack of accountability. Sure, things are tried, statements are made, and processes are developed. When it doesn't work out, there's no apology. Fans are told that the next bullet in the barrel is the real thing. It never is.

No one associated with this franchise ever stands up for anything. Lerner can't bring himself to stand in front of a camera. He claims he's camera shy, which is fine, but until he gives a reason for anyone to believe any differently, all he's really saying is that he's a coward.

From there it flows. Every general manager or coach he's hired to be his proxy as the face and voice of this franchise ends up explaining the latest mess not in terms of flawed plans but in terms of external factors gone awry. Lines in the sand never get drawn.

Mangini is just the latest paper tiger. He talks about patience and a process but offers nothing concrete that would make a fan think there is any substance to what he says or that he has any inclination to be personally held accountable should he fail. As things crumble around him, it has nothing to do with anything he's done wrong. It's all just part of the grand scheme of failing upward toward success. It's a mindset that ultimately seeps into the psyche of the players.

It's why the culture in Cleveland never changes. No matter which players float in and out of Berea like driftwood on Lake Erie, whatever fine talk they are given about accountability when they arrive is undercut by a far more lasting impression they are presented of an owner and a coach who shirk accountability themselves.