

Belichick coordinating the defense. Throughout, Belichick usually worked “from 5 or 6 a.m. until 11 p.m. He often slept in his office. His wife and three children would schedule in time during the day to come visit him.”¹⁹⁴⁵ Belichick has always worked harder than anyone else because he loves football and has an exceptional body that seems to require little sleep.

CLEVELAND BROWNS HEAD COACH (1991-1995)

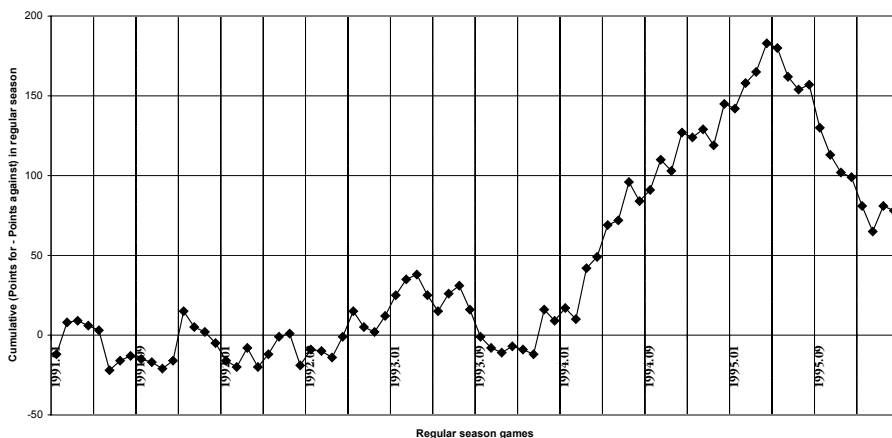
“We took a bad team, made it pretty good, made the playoffs, had a bad year in the most off-the-charts negative situation maybe in football history, got fired. It just wasn’t a good mix between [owner] Art [Modell] and me.”¹⁹⁴⁶

– *Bill Belichick*

Just 38 years old, Bill Belichick became the NFL’s youngest head coach when he took over the Cleveland Browns in 1991, but he didn’t let it go to his head. In presenting Belichick to Cleveland, Browns owner Art Modell called Belichick a young Don Shula. Belichick was characteristically embarrassed by the comparison: “To be compared to Don Shula really is a joke. I mean, the guy’s a Hall of Fame coach. I haven’t coached one game in this league. I hope he’s not insulted.”¹⁹⁴⁷

Super Bowl victory that got away?

Cleveland Browns Under Belichick - Cumulative Net Points



A substantial case can be made that Bill Belichick would eventually have led the Browns to a Super Bowl championship if Art Modell had not announced in the middle of the 1995 season that he would move the Browns to Baltimore. Belichick inherited a horrible football team (the 3-13 Browns of 1990 who had scored 228 points while surrendering 462) and needed time to grow into the position of head coach. Despite a rough start, by 1994, Belichick had transformed the atrocious team

he had inherited into an 11-5 playoff team in 1994. Belichick's Browns even won their first playoff game, ironically defeating the New England Patriots, coached by Belichick's former and future boss Bill Parcells, and finishing 12-6.

Further, Belichick had assembled an incredible staff that included two future "NCAA Coach of the Year" winners and many executives and coaches who subsequently helped lead the Panthers, Patriots, Raiders, and Ravens to the Super Bowl. The Browns' 1995 season started off well (a close 17-14 defeat followed by three solid victories of 22-6, 14-7, and 35-17). Despite a September *Boston Globe* article by Will McDonough that the Browns might leave Cleveland,¹⁹⁴⁸ after eight games, Belichick's Browns were 4-4, with three close losses (14-17, 19-22, and 15-23). On November 4th, before the Browns' ninth game, *Boston Globe* reporter Will McDonough broke the story that the team was moving to Baltimore. That news shocked players, fans, coaches... even Belichick, who had been kept in the dark by owner Art Modell. Belichick says:

"The departure announcement put team morale in the tank. ...The people of Cleveland felt like they had been abandoned. If you were part of the Browns organization, you felt more like a deserter than an outcast. We were still there... but we were leaving, so it was worse than if we had actually left... Tremendous animosity developed against the team. In no way is this intended as an excuse for our record... because we didn't play well enough, and we had to fight through it. But it was a huge obstacle to overcome... The ownership left town and participated in the welcoming festivities in Baltimore. The players on the team felt abandoned with a lot of questions about their future."¹⁹⁴⁹

The Browns were blown out in their next two games, 10-37 and 3-20. After winning four of eight games in the first half of 1995 (that might have been six wins with a bit of luck), the Browns won only one of eight in the second half. Modell's decision to uproot the team precipitated players' complete mental meltdown, and the rest of the season was a total loss. Only Belichick himself remained focused: "Bill Belichick came into the office every day, and it was the same as I imagine it is with the Patriots: He was only interested in talking about whatever the thing was that he thought would give his team the best chance to win the game."¹⁹⁵⁰ Belichick remained so focused, in fact, that he failed to address his players' inability to cope. His players were not concentrating on football because, for example, Cleveland's infamous "Dawg Pound" was so incensed by the team's impending move that rowdy fans who formerly hurled dog bones onto the field instead began chucking batteries.¹⁹⁵¹

To this day, virtually every coach and executive from Belichick's Browns insists Belichick put Cleveland on the road to a Super Bowl. Owner Art Modell uprooted the 1995 Cleveland Browns and turned into the 1996 Baltimore Ravens. The 2000 Ravens won the Super Bowl. Ravens general manager and executive VP Ozzie Newsome, who credits Belichick for his transition from player to executive,

says flatly: “If we would have remained in Cleveland, we would have won a Super Bowl. We were headed in the right direction. . . . A lot of what we did in Baltimore, the foundation was built in Cleveland.”¹⁹⁵² Nick Saban, who coached LSU to college football’s 2003 national championship after serving as the Browns’ defensive coordinator under Belichick, says: “Bill built a good Browns team from 1991 to 1994. There’s no doubt he would’ve had the same success there that he’s had everywhere else.”¹⁹⁵³

Belichick’s offensive line coach in Cleveland, Kirk Ferentz (who won college football’s Coach of the Year award in 2002), agrees with Saban:

“After things didn’t work out in Cleveland for Bill, I told my wife, ‘I predict he’s going to hit a home run if he gets another chance.’ He’s so meticulous, so reflective, that there was no doubt in my mind he’d succeed. We all make mistakes, and I’m sure he feels he made his share. But I’m not surprised to see how well he’s done now. He’s just so. . . detail oriented, and he’s willing to have the courage of his convictions to try things that he feels will work.”¹⁹⁵⁴

Bill’s long-time close friend and special assistant in both Cleveland and New England, Ernie Adams, noted back in 1994 that building a winning organization takes time:

“People around here didn’t understand this whole building process. They acted like they thought Bill could come in here, wave the magic wand, sprinkle some stardust and everything was going to get better instantly. In his first couple of years here, he didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of making the playoffs with the talent he was left with. The reason Bill has turned it around, is because he had a clear and consistent vision of this team from Day One, and he never deviated from it. That’s Bill, make a plan and stick to it.”¹⁹⁵⁵

Indeed, in his first news conference as head coach of the Cleveland Browns in 1991, Belichick stressed some key attributes that later characterized his Patriots championship teams: “Everybody is going to work together and we are going to get it done. I want an aggressive, hustling team with a good work ethic.”¹⁹⁵⁶ And Bill had already developed one of his most famous defensive strategies when the Browns took on the Warren Moon-led pass-crazy Houston Oilers in 1991. Before that game, he told Ernie Accorsi, “you better warn the owner, it could get ugly. I don’t know how we’re going to stop them. . . . There’s only one thing we can do. They’re going to catch a thousand passes. They’re going to get the crap knocked out of them every time they catch one.”¹⁹⁵⁷

Current Oakland Raiders player personnel director Mike Lombardi, who worked with Belichick in Cleveland before helping Oakland reach Super Bowl XXXVII, agrees with Adams that Belichick’s vision and coaching is largely unchanged:

“the perception of Bill has changed. But I’m telling you he’s the same guy. ...I thought then, and I think now, that he was everything you could want in a head coach.”¹⁹⁵⁸ Legendary Cleveland Browns running back Jim Brown similarly swears that “he’s exactly the same man I knew 10 years ago.”¹⁹⁵⁹

The man who hired Belichick as Cleveland’s head coach, Ernie Accorsi, left Cleveland a year after the hiring but agrees Belichick turned the Browns around: “I chuckle when people say Bill failed in Cleveland. I give him a free pass for 1995.”¹⁹⁶⁰ “[Bill] didn’t fail, he was coaching in an impossible situation.”¹⁹⁶¹

Meddling owner

Belichick’s Browns were also hampered by owner Art Modell’s interference in personnel decisions. When the league instituted a salary cap, Browns executives smartly traveled to meet Jerry West for three hours of advice on how he maintained the Los Angeles Lakers as a perpetual NBA power. The Browns could not follow West’s advice because Modell insisted on overpaying for players Belichick didn’t even want, most notably \$27 million for Bernie Kosar whom Belichick believed, largely correctly, was washed up. Just five weeks after Modell handed that mega-contract to Kosar (whom Modell said was “like a son to me”¹⁹⁶² ...as Patriots owner Bob Kraft would later say about Drew Bledsoe), Belichick released Kosar, officially for diminishing performance but also (unofficially) for insubordination and to save some money. Belichick’s entire staff (plus legendary Browns running back Jim Brown,¹⁹⁶³ whom Belichick brought along to bolster his case in Modell’s eyes) confirmed to Modell that Kosar was washed up and was harming the team by sowing discord in the locker room and defiantly ignoring the coaches’ plays and calling his own.¹⁹⁶⁴ Kosar later joined the Cowboys as a backup (for just \$1 million) and stepped in and won the January 2004 NFC Championship Game after Troy Aikman suffered a concussion. But Kosar was never again a #1 quarterback deserving of a multi-million dollar contract. His completion percentage and yards-per-attempt had dipped markedly in 1993 and never really bounced back. (Belichick was apparently to blame, however, for deciding to pay troubled wide receiver Andre “Bad Moon” Rison \$17.5 million.¹⁹⁶⁵)

Ironically, after Belichick saved Modell over \$20 million by releasing Kosar, Modell argued he had to move the team to Baltimore because he was “financially strapped.” Modell fired Belichick during a phone call but found time to interview Belichick’s replacement in person later that same day.¹⁹⁶⁶

(Getting burned by lack of personnel control in Cleveland and then ignominiously fired by the Browns played a major role in Belichick’s decision five years later to walk away from the New York Jets’ head coaching job. Belichick feared coaching a team while someone else, Bill Parcells, controlled team personnel. A *New York Post* headline screamed “Belichicken,” but Belichick didn’t want to repeat his Cleveland experience. On January 21, 2000, Belichick’s attorney informed the new

New York Jets owner that Belichick was willing to return as Jets head coach but only if he were given full control.¹⁹⁶⁷)

Learning curve

Belichick was a 39-year-old rookie head coach in 1991 and admits that being a first-time head coach is “a big learning experience.”¹⁹⁶⁸ It’s unrealistic to expect instant success from any coach who takes over a team in shambles, especially a coach with no prior head coaching experience at either the college or NFL level. NFL owners realize this and frequently hire retread former NFL coaches with poor-to-average track records or even former college head coaches over otherwise stellar candidates lacking head coaching experience. Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, for example, insisted on an experienced NFL head coach in his search that ended with Bill Parcells because “We couldn’t afford to go with someone who hadn’t had [head coaching] experience in the NFL.”¹⁹⁶⁹

Former Browns quarterback Bernie Kosar believes one of Belichick’s rookie mistakes was stretching himself too thin by trying to do too much of the stuff assistant coaches and executives should do: “He tried to do everything—offense and defense, contract negotiations, personnel negotiations. At any age, that’s a difficult job. I think bluntly he wasn’t ready.”¹⁹⁷⁰ Belichick actually agrees: “I’ve learned from the previous coaching experience... to delegate more. Previously, I think I maybe tried to do too many little things; too many things that maybe took me away from bigger-picture things that I should’ve been doing.”¹⁹⁷¹ In Cleveland, Belichick once naively attempted to serve simultaneously as head coach, offensive coordinator and defensive coordinator.¹⁹⁷²

Belichick’s shift to head coach was even more painful because he tried to become Bill Parcells. Belichick should have been himself. Instead, players responded badly when Belichick successfully mimicked Parcells’ tough guy routine but none of Parcells’ endearing qualities. Mike Baab, who played for the Cleveland Browns in Belichick’s first season (1991), recalls the misery: “He was the most profane coach I’ve ever heard. I don’t think he was interested in becoming your friend in any way, shape, or form. He didn’t endear himself to anyone at all. There was nothing to love there, except the hope we would win. ... That first year, he was completely lacking in people skills.”¹⁹⁷³ Belichick worked players mercilessly: “It was almost horrifying. We ran gassers until we vomited. He never had a good thing to say to anybody. He didn’t care.”¹⁹⁷⁴ The media had no love for him either. *Cleveland Plain Dealer* journalist Tony Grossi compared a Belichick press conference to “putting a sharp pencil into your eye.”¹⁹⁷⁵ The *Hartford Courant*’s Alan Greenberg compared it with “a root canal.”¹⁹⁷⁶ Belichick confesses “I had an adversarial relationship with the team and the media. I made winning football games the No. 1 priority, and everything else was a distant second.”¹⁹⁷⁷ He also admits “I might have been a little too rough on [the players] at times” but not because he’s sadistic: “In the end, my intent isn’t to try to