

SPORTS

CLEVELAND BROWNS

Mangini mum on GM's sudden ouster

By Tom Withers
Associated Press

BEREA — The convoluted ouster of George Kokinis as Cleveland's general manager barely made a ripple in the Browns' locker room.

The guys are accustomed to losses.

Pro Bowl tackle Joe Thomas hardly knew Kokinis, who was hired in January and left the club under unexplained circumstances on Monday.

"He wasn't around too much, and when he was, he was pretty quiet," Thomas said.

Everyone inside team headquarters at 76 Lou Groza Blvd. was pretty quiet on Tuesday. The Browns, who have a bye this week, went about their business as rumors swirled about Kokinis, the events that led up to his departure and who — or if — anyone will replace him.

Browns coach Eric Mangini offered no details about the

team's decision to move on without his longtime friend and hand-picked GM.

"Anytime a decision like this is made it is difficult personally and professionally," Mangini said. "George is a friend of mine and I respect him and I wish his family well. I can tell you that for a variety of reasons things didn't work out. You never go into a situation like this with the intention of it not working out."

"We felt that, organizationally, this was the best decision in order to move forward."

That was about as deep as Mangini would venture into the Kokinis matter. Mangini spent most of his news conference politely deflecting questions about why the decision was made.

He was asked if there were legal reasons why he couldn't address Kokinis' exit.

"There's really a variety of reasons," he said, "and I'll just leave it at that."

Browns owner Randy Lerner, who following Sunday's loss in Chicago said he planned to hire a "serious, credible" football authority to help run his fumbling

franchise, was not available for comment. A team spokesman said there was no immediate plans for Lerner to address the media.

Lerner did spend two hours meeting with two disgruntled season-ticket holders, who have been urging Cleveland fans to stay out of their seats for the Nov. 16 kickoff against Baltimore in protest of the team's futility. "Dawg Pound Mike" Randall said Lerner was open to their ideas and gave them a few of his own.

"He's trying to get the Browns on the right track," Randall said. "He wants it to happen now. He cares deeply."

It's still not known if Kokinis was fired or forced out by the Browns, who are 1-7 and have been overmatched in most of their games.

There are reports that Kokinis was asked to resign by Lerner, who pressed the former GM and sought to dismiss him "for cause." Citing a team source, ESPN.com reported that the team's security and legal department were reviewing phone records to build its case against Kokinis.

The Browns denied reports that Kokinis was escorted from the building on Monday.

As for a possible replacement for Kokinis, Mangini would not comment when asked if former Browns quarterback Bernie Kosar might handle some of the GM's responsibilities. Kosar was recently brought in by Lerner in an unspecified consulting role that could expand.

Also, the team has not addressed reports that former Browns and New York Giants GM Ernie Accorsi, a close friend of Lerner's, might return to Cleveland in some capacity. Accorsi helped Lerner search for a GM earlier this year and has been working as a consultant for the NFL since retiring in 2007.

Mangini said he would not be resistant to the Browns giving final personnel decisions to someone else in the future.

"My goal is to win and my goal is to improve," he said. "There's never opposition to someone that can help us achieve that goal. That's true here. It was true in New York with the Jets."

Mangini said he learned

Browns waive kicker Cundiff

Associated Press

BEREA — No longer needed, kicker Billy Cundiff has been waived by the Cleveland Browns.

Cundiff filled in while Phil Dawson missed five games with a pulled right calf muscle. Cundiff made all six field-goal tries for the Browns (1-7).

Dawson returned for last week's game against Chicago and had his extra point blocked in a 30-6 loss to the Chicago Bears.

The Browns also waived defensive back Anthony Madison.

Cleveland has a bye this week and hosts Baltimore in a Monday night game on Nov. 16.

under coaching mentors Bill Parcells and Bill Belichick the benefits of being open to the opinions of others.

"You appreciate the feedback," he said. "You appreciate the honesty. You appreciate people trying to constantly improve at what they're doing or constantly help the group improve. You want to hire as many people as you possibly can like that."

Mangini and Kokinis began their careers together working under Belichick, when New England's coach was with the Browns in the 1990s.

Their breakup as a management team came less than

a year after former GM Phil Savage and coach Romeo Crennel were dismissed after failing to make Cleveland a consistent winner.

Kokinis' parting is just more of the same for the Browns.

"It doesn't affect me," tight end Steve Heiden said. "I can speak for myself on this because I've been here a while and I've seen some changes. I can't control anything that goes on anywhere else besides at this locker. That's the truth and that's all I'm trying to do."

"I'm in my bubble and I'm staying there."

Fans encouraged after meeting with Browns owner

By Tom Withers
Associated Press

BEREA — Die-hard Browns fan Mike Randall made sure he put on his Sunday best for his important meeting with team owner Randy Lerner.

He wore a giant plastic dog bone hat.

The season-ticket holder, aka "Dawg Pound Mike," one of the best known members of Cleveland's rabid bleacher section of fans, spent two hours on Tuesday meeting with Lerner, who stepped away from a turbulent week and his busy schedule for the visit.

Randall and his friend, Tony Schafer, have been encouraging others to stay out of their seats for the opening kickoff of Cleveland's next home game on Nov. 16 to protest the Browns' futility. The fans were scheduled to spend 30 minutes with Lerner but ended up staying much longer.

"It was great," Randall said. "How many owners would spend two hours meeting with two fans? None."

Randall said Lerner was receptive to their ideas for improving the Browns' game-day experience at Cleveland Browns Stadium and even tossed out a few of his own.

Randall, who has met Lerner several times, came away impressed with the owner's passion and determination to get the Browns turned around.

"He's doing everything he can to improve the Browns," Randall said. "He wants it to happen — now."

Lerner's meeting with the fans came less than 24 hours after general manager George Kokinis was removed from his job, the latest upheaval for a franchise that has made the playoffs just once since 1999 and is on its fourth head coach in 10 years.

The camera-shy Lerner has yet to address the circumstances sur-

rounding Kokinis' departure.

Randall said Lerner liked the fans' idea for displaying some of the team's championship banners and retired jersey numbers inside the stadium. Lerner also seemed unaware of the strict security measures in place at the stadium, a zero-tolerance policy that has upset some Cleveland fans.

"He's a fan, just like us," Randall said. "He wants what's best for Cleveland and I believe him. He wants to win."

Randall said he and Schafer are going forward with the "Brown out" protest despite their meeting with Lerner. They will consider

canceling it if Lerner agrees to speak to Browns fans, who walked out by the thousands during the second half of a recent home loss to Green Bay.

Randall said he presented Lerner with a quote from Theodore Roosevelt that he felt best summed up his desire to have Browns fans heard.

"It says, 'In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing,'" Randall said. "Randy liked that. We're doing something. So is he."

WORLD SERIES

Pettitte, Yanks go for title against old foe Pedro

By Mike Fitzpatrick
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Andy Pettitte leaned forward in his chair and recounted a recent chat he had with Derek Jeter as soon as they realized what was next in this World Series.

Pettitte vs. old foe Pedro Martinez, with the Yankees one win from ecstasy.

Still chasing that elusive 27th championship, New York turns to Pettitte once again in Game 6 on Wednesday night, hoping he can pitch his team past the Philadelphia Phillies on only three days' rest.

"Me and Derek were talking about it in the clubhouse last night. Just, how strange is this?" Pettitte said Tuesday. "I think everybody knew it was going to be a great Series. I think everybody knew it was going to be a tough Series. And it looks like it's living up to that."

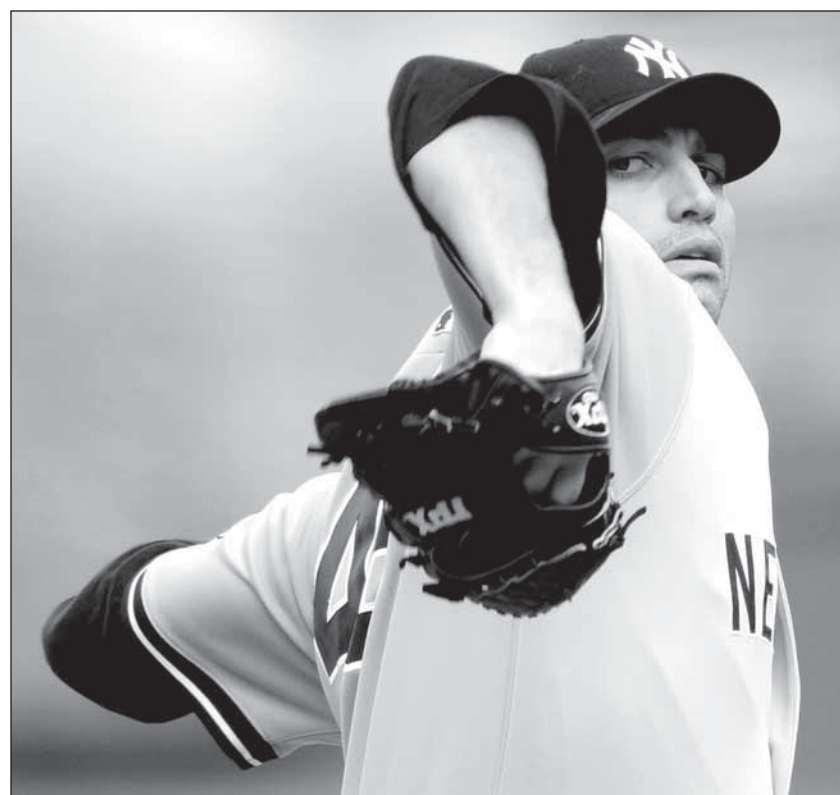
After wasting a chance to wrap things up in Game 5 at Philadelphia, the Yankees set their sights on clinching at home. They'd love to christen their \$1.5 billion ballpark with a World Series crown in its first season and give a seventh title to 79-year-old owner George Steinbrenner.

"They've got two chances to do it. Game 7 would be Thursday night in the Bronx if necessary, with ace CC Sabathia pitching for New York — also on short rest."

"People expect us to be great all the time. We just need to be great tomorrow night," Johnny Damon said.

Coming off an 8-6 victory Monday night that trimmed their Series deficit to 3-2, the defending champion Phillies took the train to New York on Tuesday afternoon, a ride that takes a little more than an hour. They chose not to work out at Yankee Stadium, but their opponents did.

Martinez and Manuel showed up at the ballpark for news conferences. Manuel was uncertain whether All-Star center fielder Shane Victorino would be able to play in Game 6 after getting hit in the right hand with A.J. Burnett's 95 mph fastball



The New York Yankees will send Andy Pettitte (above) to the mound tonight looking to close out the Philadelphia Phillies in Game 6 of the World Series and win their 27th championship.

Monday night.

If Victorino can't go, Ben Francisco would likely start in center.

The last team to rally from a 3-1 deficit to win the World Series was the 1985 Kansas City Royals.

On the other side, second-year Yankees manager Joe Girardi confirmed that he won't hesitate to use a well-rested Mariano Rivera for multiple innings Wednesday to try and close it out.

"The only thing I focus on is Game 6. I don't focus on legacy, because I'm not worried about my legacy," said Girardi, trying to guide New York to its first title in nine years. "People are always going to have perceptions of you, and some of them are going to be true, and probably most of them are going to be false."

Pettitte and Martinez first squared off on the mound 11 years ago, but they've never done so in the postseason. Both pitchers are 3-3 in six matchups, all games between the

Yankees and Red Sox from 1998-2003. The visitor has won each time and Martinez has a 3.86 ERA to Pettitte's 5.88, according to STATS LLC.

In their first meeting, Girardi hit a three-run homer off Martinez, but Boston chased Pettitte during an 11-run third inning and won 13-7.

With so much on the line this time, it's a delicious matchup of gritty pros in their late 30s, long past their primes.

"Two old goats out there doing the best they can and having fun with it," Martinez said. "I don't have enough words to describe how excited I am about being here. This is just a great gift to me."

The forecast calls for temperatures in the mid-40s at game time, with no rain.

The 38-year-old Martinez pitched well in a Game 2 loss at Yankee Stadium and now gets the ball on regular rest for the first time since mid-September. He's had several

long layoffs since.

The 37-year-old Pettitte, on the other hand, will have only three days between starts for the first time since Sept. 30, 2006, with Houston. According to STATS, the savvy left-hander is 5-7 with a 4.18 ERA in 18 such outings during his career, including the postseason.

This one marks a major change, though. Pettitte has been on extra rest in his past eight starts dating to Sept. 11.

"I would think that he's rested," Girardi said, laughing.

Pettitte has a knack for closing this time of year. He owns 17 postseason wins and five that clinched series — both big league records. Two of those clinchers came in the AL playoffs this year. He is 3-0 with a 3.24 ERA in four starts this postseason, including a shaky Game 3 win at Philadelphia.

No wonder the Yankees have plenty of confidence in him when it comes to big games.

"We are in a good situation," catcher Jorge Posada said.

A familiar one, too.

In the AL Championship Series, Burnett failed to put away the Los Angeles Angels in Game 5 on the road. Pettitte, however, won the Game 6 clincher at home.

Burnett flopped in Philadelphia on Monday night, and now the task falls again to Pettitte, looking for his fifth World Series ring with the Yankees.

"This is a veteran team. We've got a lot of guys who have been through this before," Sabathia said. "Hopefully, that experience will carry us through."

Martinez, who sat out the first half of the season and joined the Phillies in mid-July, will be trying to push the Series to a Game 7 for the first time since 2002.

"I think he's ready. I think he's kind of peaking at the right time. He didn't have any spring training, went a half a year, didn't pitch, and he had to work himself up," Manuel said. "He's starting to get stretched out. The more he throws, the better he's getting. Yeah, he's capable of throwing a real good game."

NASCAR

Bump ban produces single-file Talladega

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — To anyone watching, Sunday's race at Talladega Superspeedway looked like a high-speed protest of NASCAR's pre-race ban on bumping in turns.

Cars paraded around the 2.66-mile speedway in a long, single-file line after NASCAR made it clear that bump-drafting would not be tolerated.

"It wasn't like everybody was in their cars and we were like, 'Let's get single-file and prove a point' or 'Let's just follow each other,'" race-winner Jamie McMurray said. "You had to be in the outside groove because that's where all the momentum was."

McMurray snapped an 86-race losing streak after the final 10 laps were marred by two frightening accidents in which the cars of Ryan Newman and then Mark Martin went airborne.

Newman, who was trapped in his car for almost 15 minutes before rescue workers could shear away its roof, called it "a boring race and a ridiculous race" afterward. But McMurray didn't think the race was all that different.

"I remember in 2004, 2005 with the other car, Dale Jr. riding around the very top of the race track and everybody following him," he said. "I remember it being really similar to that. And more than anything now, the drivers have learned they have to make it to the end of the race in order to win the race. So maybe they don't take the chances that they did a few years ago."

Kurt Busch, sixth with three races remaining for the 2009 NASCAR championship, called the lack of risk-taking a byproduct of the restrictor plates used only at Talladega and Daytona.

"It's been an ongoing process since they introduced the restrictor plates, as far as this Catch-22 that we're in," Busch said. "We have to provide for the safety of the drivers and the fans, and yet at the same time, we have to put on a good show."