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Haslam, Banner say they erred in hiring Chudzinski

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CLEVELAND -- Browns owner Jimmy Haslam said Monday his next move is to fix the mistake he made by hiring head coach Rob Chudzinski nearly one year ago.

Roughly 15 hours after firing Chudzinski after 352 days on the job, Haslam appeared along with CEO Joe Banner at the team's Berea facility and explained why the Browns will seek their fourth coach in six seasons.

During a sometimes testy press conference that included a reference to team management as "the Three Stooges," Haslam said he and Banner became convinced the Browns were backsliding under Chudzinski and needed to cut their losses.

"We felt we needed to be better in the last three games of the season than we were in the first three games," Haslam said. "Our feeling was we weren't getting better."

Haslam and Banner said the Browns failed to make the same improvement over the course of the season as other teams with first-year coaches, a somewhat dubious claim.

Of the league's seven first-year head coaches, only three -- the Eagles' Chip Kelly (10-6 overall; 7-1 in the second half), the Jaguars' Gus Bradley (4-12; 4-4) and the Cardinals' Bruce Arians (10-6; 6-2) -- led their teams to better second-half records.

Still, Banner said Chudzinski and his staff failed to make adequate progress with a team that started 4-5 but lost its last seven games, finishing with five or fewer wins for the sixth straight year.

"You expect the greatest amount of improvement from young players, and we didn't see that," Banner said, adding that reports he and Chudzinski clashed over roster decisions or player issues were false.

"I want to be unequivocal," Banner said of any issues beyond wins and losses. "There was no such thing."

Haslam and Banner repeatedly were pressed on whether they felt Chudzinski was given enough time to prove himself, given the factors. Chudzinski was a first-time head coach

with an unsettled quarterback situation whose franchise runner was traded for a draft pick on Sept. 19.

Banner pointed to a series of free-agent acquisitions, including linebacker Paul Kruger and wide receiver Davone Bess, as proof the Browns weren't tanking this season and expected immediate results.

He went on to say that he doesn't believe the rebuilding process under the next coach will necessarily be extensive.

"We're not asking people to sit still for some long-term plan," Banner said.

Both men said they were sensitive to outrage among the Browns' fan base over yet another coaching change. Chudzinski's firing comes on the heels of two-year stints by Eric Mangini and Pat Shurmur, both of which brought significant changes in systems on both sides of the ball.

"We deserve skepticism," Haslam said. "Until we get the right guy that comes in here and wins football games, talk is cheap."

Haslam said he and Banner met with the team as a whole Monday morning, then with a smaller group of team leaders to address their concerns. Several players, most notably veterans Joe Thomas and D'Qwell Jackson, had said Sunday they were stunned by reports Chudzinski might be in trouble.

Chudzinski, fired in a meeting with Haslam and Banner after the team returned from Pittsburgh on Sunday night, issued a statement expressing "shock and disappointment," but thanked Haslam for the chance to live out "a dream" coaching the team he rooted for growing up in Toledo, Ohio.

Several veteran players, including Thomas, Jackson, Alex Mack and Jason Campbell, were not present during the team's media availability session Monday, according to ESPN.com.

One who was, wide receiver Josh Gordon, said he was stunned Chudzinski lasted only one season.

"I didn't even know that was possible," Gordon told ESPN.com.

Banner said Chudzinski's staff, including coordinators Norv Turner and Ray Horton, would be retained until a new coach is hired but would be permitted to interview elsewhere.

Banner did not identify any potential candidates and vowed to proceed deliberately with hiring Chudzinski's replacement. He said the Browns had no plans to re-interview

candidates from last year's search, seemingly ruling out Penn State's Bill O'Brien and former Cardinals head coach Ken Whisenhunt.

Two early candidates, according to various reports, are current NFL offensive coordinators -- Denver's Adam Gase and New England's Josh McDaniels.

Chudzinski reportedly will receive around \$10.5 million in a buyout, according to ESPN's Chris Mortensen. ESPN's Darren Rovell reported that the Browns will have spent about \$30 million to buy out their last four head coaches.

"These are expensive moves," said Haslam, who called the upcoming offseason "critical" for the Browns.

At one point Monday, a television news reporter relayed to Haslam a list of what he said were reactions from Browns fans over Chudzinski's firing. One of the responses referred to Banner as Haslam's "stooge."

"Can you assure fans that you don't have the Three Stooges running this organization?" the reporter asked.

Haslam laughed, and added that he's not concerned the team has scared away prospective candidates by giving Chudzinski only a season on the job.

"I feel confident we're going to be able to convince people this is not only a good but a great place to coach," Haslam said.

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