

Inside the Game- Week 1

Written by {ga=jta1975}

Saturday, September 08 2012 10:55 AM - Last Updated Sunday, September 09 2012 5:36 PM



As the NFL season kicks off, this week 1 matchup is a rematch of week 3 of the preseason. In that game the Eagles came to Cleveland and won a 27-10 game but I am pretty sure neither team is putting much stock in the contest.

In that game neither team approached it like a conventional week 3 preseason game in which you play your starters into the 3rd quarter, and for both teams many of their week one starters didn't play.

This game pits teacher against pupil as Eagles head coach Andy Reid faces his longtime assistant and current head coach of the Cleveland Browns Pat Shurmur.

Week 1

When/Where: Sunday 1:00pm Cleveland, Ohio Cleveland Browns Stadium

Opponent: Philadelphia Eagles

Current Spread: Browns +9

Overview

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Each year in the NFL teams get the opportunity to play the games that determine the outcome of their season and for the Cleveland Browns that is a good thing, because over the last 10 years these teams have proven to be in different social classes. On paper this year is no different.

Over those ten years the Eagles have been contenders for their division, conference, and Super Bowl and the Browns haven't done any of that. This year's Philadelphia team is stacked with players who have had success in the NFL and the Browns are fielding a team with 15 rookies, 26 first or second year players, and starting are starting a rookie QB, RB, and RT on offense.

On the surface this young Browns team looks overmatched, but in the NFL the play on the field dictates the outcome, not numbers on paper, so the Cleveland Browns will have their chance Sunday to start the 2012 season with a win just like the Eagles will. Let's get inside the game on Sunday and peek into what we might expect to see.

Defense

The Philadelphia Eagles field a defense that is primed on aggressive play with their front four and great CB play on the outside. Whenever you talk about the Eagles defense you will hear the term "wide 9" so get used to it. The term is referring to the DE's alignment. Philadelphia is one of the teams in the NFL that uses a really wide alignment of their DEs that forces teams to run inside and allows their LBs to play "downhill". It also puts a ton of pressure on the opposing team's offensive tackles in the passing game.

By aligning their DEs really wide it tends to force teams to run inside and it also allows their athletic and fast DEs to have one on one situations while rushing the passer. You can expect the Eagles to rotate defensive lineman in an attempt to keep their rushers fresh and maintain their pressure throughout the contest and they have plenty of pass rush specialists to do just that.

The Eagles have 6 DEs who could all be starters in the league and their two starters both had double digit sacks last year. Jason Babin, who is coming off of a preseason injury, is expected to play and he piled up 18 sacks by himself last year. The other starter, Trent Cole, is coming into this season with 3 consecutive seasons of double digit sacks and he has 68 total sacks in

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his career. To that group you can add athletic DTs Derek Landri, Cullen Jenkins, and rookie Fletcher Cox (12th pick) which all adds up to an explosive front four.

The LB core of the Eagles was a weak spot last year but with a trade for DeMeco Ryans and the drafting of Pac 12 defensive player of the year Mychal Kendricks that is no longer the case. The rookie LB will be a contender for defensive rookie of the year and Ryans was a Pro Bowl caliber LB the last time he played in a 4-3. He got lost a bit in the new 3-4 scheme the Houston Texans currently run but he is just the type of veteran leader the group needed and he will make a ton of tackles in this style of defense.

The backend of the defense are all returning players to this defense and the CB tandem of Nnamdi Asomugha and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie are arguably the best duo in the league. They excel at man to man coverage and, combined with the pressure put on offenses by the front four, it makes for plenty of turnover opportunities.

Schematically you can expect this Eagles defense to play aggressive up front as they play the run on the way to the QB, and you should also see plenty of man coverage from the secondary. On film you can also see the Eagles run a nice complement to their "wide 9" formation. At times they use the polar opposite alignment and bunch all their front four down while bringing their LBs up to the line of scrimmage, creating a situation where they get a body over every offensive lineman.

This alignment creates one on one situations inside and allows a LB to come free. This look sometimes confuses lines and it certainly creates a contrast to the spread out look teams are used to seeing from them. The overall goal of the defense will be to make the QB face constant pressure and force him into bad throws so their ball-hawking secondary can create turnovers.

Game specific for the Eagles defense facing the Browns, I would expect them to blitz a few more times than normal. The ideal will be to test rookie QB Brandon Weeden's ability to diagnose and then beat blitz packages as well as get the QB on the move. Most people understand that Weeden is more comfortable in the pocket and he can't make the type of plays that Colt McCoy could outside of the pocket, so the Eagles will test his ability to make plays on the move.

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The Eagles will also blitz and stunt up front in an effort to confuse rookie RT Mitchell Schwartz. The rookie will already have his head spinning trying to stop the explosive DEs off the line of scrimmage and I would expect the Eagles to add to his angst by attacking with LBs and performing a few stunts.

You should also expect to see the SS in the box in an attempt to control the running game of Trent Richardson. From his first snap Richardson will be the most explosive weapon on Cleveland's offense and the Eagles will more than likely rely on the safety to help keep the run in check.

Offense

Schematically the Eagles offense will look a lot like Cleveland's but the personnel associated with Philadelphia will be the big difference. The offense is led by Pro Bowl and record setting QB Mike Vick. He will lead the team in their 3 WR base offense and he will take plenty of snaps from the shotgun.

Of course everyone knows Vick is a record setting rusher from the QB position so you can expect him to extend plays with his legs as well as extend plays in an effort to find WRs down field for big plays.

The Eagles have a budding star at the RB position with LeSean (Shady) McCoy who is as quick and elusive as any RB in the league. McCoy is coming off of a 1300 yard, 17 TD season and is equally dangerous in the passing game. The Eagles love attacking the perimeter of the opposing defense with McCoy and plenty of outside runs so expect to see a lot of that on Sunday. McCoy is also deadly in the screen game and he makes a living off of draw plays so Cleveland's DTs will need to be disciplined with their gap integrity.

In the passing game the Eagles are one of the best teams in the league at attacking teams vertically. WR DeSean Jackson is as fast and slippery as any WR in the league and his counter-part Jeremy Maclin is a good all around WR possessing the speed to get deep as well as the size and route running ability to work over a CB. The Eagles 3rd WR might be the lynch pin that holds the unit together because he has the size to keep defenses honest in the middle of the field.

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Philadelphia starts TE Brent Celek who is a reliable pass catcher that can block effectively in the run game. Celek isn't a dynamic athlete but he understands how to get open and has reliable hands.

I expect the Eagles to spend the majority of their snaps with this 3 WR personnel on the field and they will use plenty of motion in an attempt to get Jackson in mismatches, as well as an attempt to ensure the slight Jackson can get clean releases off the line of scrimmage.

When it comes to a game plan I would look for the Eagles to attack the young LBs in the run game and the new starter for Cleveland (Eric Hagg) at safety. Philadelphia will test the young safety's ability to cover the deep part of the field and they will test both of Cleveland's CB's on deep passes.

They will try and use Joe Haden's aggressiveness against him on double moves as well as using a few hitch patterns to draw him closer to the line of scrimmage.....then going over the top. They will simply test the aging legs on Cleveland's other CB Sheldon Brown.

Game Plan

When you are putting together a winning plan to beat the Eagles it should consist of a few key elements.

- ·Control time of possession with a solid running game
- ·Win the turnover battle
- ·Get plenty of hits on QB Mike Vick
- ·Eliminate the Eagles big plays
- ·Score TDs in the redzone

On offense you should see Cleveland use multiple TE sets either extending the line of scrimmage or creating unbalanced looks in an attempt to control the Eagles "wide 9" alignment. Using the extra TEs will allow the DEs to be chipped and it will also allow the offensive tackles

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more time to get into their protection sets.

When I studied the coaches' tape from the Titans game in 2011 (another wide 9 team) it was clear to see that the Browns were the most effective running the ball when then used two TEs without a FB because they used more quick hitting inside running plays. The quick hitting plays seemed more effective than the pulling guard power plays because the DL was really quick and often hard to reach on pulling plays.

For the Browns to win the running game battle and win time of possession the guards and center will be the key. If they can control the middle of the field it will neutralize those athletic DEs.

In the passing game Cleveland will need to test Philadelphia's 3rd CB. The CB will be much less experienced than the starters and attacking the middle of the field is probably the best option to attack Philadelphia because MLB DeMeco Ryans isn't known as a great pass defender.

The other key matchup in the passing game will come down to Cleveland's TEs beating Philly LBs in multiple TE sets. If Cleveland can run and throw effectively out of the multiple TE sets it will allow them to stay in the preferred personnel package to beat this defense.

For the defense the game plan is pretty straight forward. They will want to protect over the top in order to contain the deep ball and make the Eagles beat them on the ground with McCoy. It will also allow them to force Mike Vick into nickel and diming them to death which should keep the score down.

People used to beat Vick with zone coverage while only rushing four but ever since Eagles coach Andy Reid has made Vick a more consistent passer the game plan as of late has been pressure...pressure....pressure. Teams want Vick to move around and take hits in an attempt to make mistakes and heighten the possibility of knocking him out of the game because of his aggressive playing style.

The Eagles lost a lot of games early in the 2011 season because they lost the turnover battle in

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a big way as teams forced Vick into mistakes and fumbles. If Cleveland wants to force Vick into mistakes they can't afford to let him get into a throwing rhythm because that will boost his passing confidence, making him extremely dangerous. Having him in a rhythm also gets a defense into a lull which makes his running even more effective.

The defense will have the biggest role in beating the Eagles because Philadelphia is built to play with a lead. If they can get teams down and into predictable passing situations they tremendously increase their chances of winning.

Of course it will need to be a coordinated effort to win but they simply can't afford to allow the Eagles to play the game from a multi score lead or they are playing right into their hands. Because of this it will also be critical for Cleveland to score TDs when they are in the redzone. The Eagles aren't a team you can beat if you are forced to kick FGs all day. The Browns will need to capitalize when they have a chance and keep the game close so that running the ball is always an option.

Prediction

I am not going to beat around a bush or try to sell an ice cube to an Eskimo on this one, so I am predicting the young Browns to lose their home opener to the Eagles.

If it wasn't the first game of the year I could probably talk myself into a few scenarios where my beloved Brownies could pull this one out, but for a young team with so many rookies playing key roles it will be too tough of a hill to climb and I expect the Eagles to play this entire season with a chip on their shoulders after their performance last year.

I also think they will dedicate this season to coach Andy Reid's son who passed away during training camp and at least for game one I believe the emotion the Eagles will play with will be off the charts.

If you are heading down to Cleveland Browns Stadium have fun and be safe and as always.....Go Browns!