

The Things We Know--Week 8

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM - Last Updated Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM



The Cleveland Browns' win over the San Diego Chargers on Sunday didn't necessarily teach fans anything new with the possible exception that a tedious win is always better than a competitive loss.

Until Sunday, the Browns had a knack, honed over several years, of teasing their fans with all manner of competitive losses, the kind of "if only the defense/offense/special teams had done this or that" that inevitably caused fans to try to find a reason to keep watching the team.

Sunday's victory couldn't possibly have won over any converts. It's not as if the Browns had just hammered the New York Giants by clicking in all 3 phases. The win was against a reeling Chargers team coached by Marvin Lewis West Coast Edition that looked and played like it wanted to be anywhere but Cleveland on a cold, rainy Sunday.

But for once it's not necessary to pick through the bones of a loss that could have been a win. Instead fans can turn fate on its head by picking through the bones of a win that could have been a loss. Now there's hope and change that fans can embrace.

Even if one were to pick through the bones there wouldn't be much meat available anyway. The Browns put together exactly one good drive and it was the first one of the day. That drive was kept alive because either the elements scared the beejeezus out of head coach Pat Shurmur or because he finally is beginning to understand that when you're the head coach of a team that wins about as frequently as members of Congress agree on something substantive (or even insubstantial) there's no reason to play it cautiously.

At the Chargers' 26-yard line and facing a 4th and what looked to be mere inches, Shurmur decided to roll the dice and have the 6 foot 3 inch Brandon Weeden try to find the inch that Al

The Things We Know--Week 8

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM - Last Updated Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM

Pacino screams about in "Any Given Sunday." It wasn't Shurmur's boldest call of the season but it was out of character. In far more crucial situations he's foregone the attempt. Here, the first possession of the game, he decides that maybe now's the time to grow a pair which is what you might think actually happened until you remember that faced with another 4th down call later in the game, Shurmur reverted to form.

Anyway, given that it really was just a few inches, it wasn't that gutsy of a call and the first down was easily secured. It worked out well because it set up Trent Richardson's 26-yard touchdown run that, along with Phil Dawson's extra point, gave the Browns a lead they never relinquished. (I honestly can't remember the last time I wrote a sentence like that applied to the Browns and something they did early in a game. Maybe never.)

From there the game was a mind numbing array of offensive ineptitude from both teams. The Browns punted the ball on 9 straight possessions. Fortunately, though, they weren't all 3-and-outs. There was enough of a running game, thanks mostly to Richardson, to keep the clock moving mercifully for the brave few that thought sitting outside at Cleveland Stadium on a raw, rainy day was preferable to just about anything else that one could find to do on a raw, rainy day.

For their part, the Chargers moved the ball a little and got a couple of field goals. They also arguably threatened near the end of the game, but not really. There's was a game plan that seemed to center around trying to get the ball to Antonio Gates and why not? He was being covered by Buster Skrine most of the day, which generally means trouble for the Browns.

But in one of the abiding mysteries that is football, a game like Sunday can turn previous goats into almost heroes. While it's not time to completely reconsider Skrine, let's reconsider him briefly.

Skrine put together a game that made him not just resemble but play like a legitimate NFL defensive back. Skrine's biggest play was the pass deflection near the end of the game that ended the last Charger threat. It was a good play, unquestionably. It also was the kind of play that usually doesn't get made by the Browns, which is why they have so many competitive losses. The knack for just missing on a play that turns the game has been a specialty of Browns 2.0.

The Things We Know--Week 8

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM - Last Updated Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM

But on this particular Sunday, all of the elements combined not just for the beginnings of a tropical storm of historic proportions but for Skrine as well. He made Gates a non-factor. That's not a small accomplishment.

Before anyone rewrites the Buster Skrine narrative, let's not lose perspective. Skrine still makes Brandon McDonald look like Darrelle Reavis and until Skrine can string together a few more games like Sunday, and particularly against quarterbacks with more confidence than Phillip Rivers, he still remains on the suspect list. He just gets a reprieve for the week. Good show, Buster. Spend some time with Lucille or a Loose Seal. You choose.



The other goat turned near hero was punter Reggie Hodges or maybe that goes to Shurmur for keeping Hodges. But before getting to Hodges, let's examine a little of the context that adds still more color to an incredibly colorless game.

The Browns had 10 possessions on Sunday. Lacking the vast resources, servers and unpaid interns residing in Bristol, Connecticut, I have no idea how many times a team has had 10 possessions in a game, punted on the last 9 of them and still won the game. It can't have happened very often, right? If you score on only one possession you can only get, at most, 8 points, usually 7, sometimes 6, sometimes 3. So right there a team rarely if ever wins scoring 8 or fewer points.

In the last two years, there have been only 4 games, including Sunday's, in which a team has scored less than 10 points and won the game and Cleveland and Kansas City were involved in two of them, which makes sense because both teams have been pretty crappy and scoring challenged.

The Things We Know--Week 8

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM - Last Updated Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM

Earlier this season Baltimore beat Kansas City 9-6. But in that game, Baltimore had 3 drives in which they scored, although on field goals only. In week 17 last year the Chiefs beat the Denver Broncos 7-3. On the surface, it looks similar to Sunday's game but f beauty is only skin deep so too is ugly. It featured only one touchdown by the Chiefs but they had two other possessions that didn't result in punts. The first was a missed field goal. The second was a turnover. (Denver, with the overrated Tim Tebow was even more inept but still had more than one scoring opportunity all day. It's just that they only scored on one of their opportunities. The other was a missed field goal. And by the way, interesting fact, the two punters who got a work out that day are brothers.)

The third game was when the Browns beat the Seahawks last October 6-3. The six points were the result of two Dawson field goals, meaning that the Browns at least scored on two possessions. In fact, the Browns had four scoring opportunities in that game. Dawson also missed two field goals (the ones he made were from 53 and 52 yards, so what does that tell you about how poorly the Browns moved the ball in that game?)

What made Sunday's game unique was simply that but for the one drive they couldn't even get close enough again for a Dawson field goal attempt nor did they turn it over or even turn it over on downs (which isn't a surprise because Shurmur just can't stand 4th and short). To keep the Chargers at bay, Hodges was called on repeatedly and delivered, repeatedly. He had four kicks inside the 20 yard line. As bad as Hodges was a week before was as good as he was on Sunday. Kudos to Shurmur. I thought he should have at least put Hodges on the hot seat by auditioning other punters. Shurmur, as is his wont, didn't do anything and in the end and for another week Shurmur was right for not overreacting to Hodges' disaster against Indianapolis.

At that, there was precious little left to inform about Sunday's game, including precious little about Greg "Precious" Little. Browns receivers did little because Weeden couldn't figure out the wind and Shurmur stuck to what was working. Rivers couldn't do anything either, flagging confidence, tricky winds and general indifference the main culprits. It all was enough for a Cleveland win and in a town starved for wins, it's really all that matters.

**

I noted Shurmur's decision to try to convert 4th and inches early in the game as being out of

The Things We Know--Week 8

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM - Last Updated Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM

character, which it was. What's not out of character is the confounding decision- making that tends to dominate Shurmur's coaching style, if you want to call it that.

Shurmur let another 4th down conversion go by the way side, which was expected. I'll let that one slide because it wasn't a particularly critical moment of the game and because the Browns were winning and the Chargers were not doing anything particularly effectively.

But a word or two about the challenge flag Shurmur threw on the Chargers' very next play after the Richardson touchdown. After the Dawson kickoff, the Chargers started from their own 18 yard line. Rivers completed a short pass to Robert Meachem for all of 6 yards. The fans screamed their objection because it didn't look to be a clean catch. Shurmur through the challenge flag and a few minutes later the call was overturned. Yea, fans. Shut up next time.

The challenge was correct but to what end and at what cost? It was still the first quarter so it wasn't as if Shurmur had any legitimate reason to think the Richardson touchdown would be the last one of the day by either team. Meanwhile, a coach only gets 2 challenges per game. If he's right on both challenges, then he gets a third. That's why coaches generally make sure that they use their challenges when they matter most. Wasting a challenge early when the situation doesn't dictate means that the challenge may not be there when needed. Moreover, historically the success rate of a challenge is about 50%, making Shurmur's decision even more puzzling that early in the game.

There are plenty of plays that could be challenged but that doesn't mean they all should be. Deciding to challenge is not just a function of whether you think you're correct but the ramifications either way of not challenging and/or being wrong.

In this case, the best that could be said was that Shurmur was trying to keep the Chargers' pinned in, something that did in fact happen when the Chargers were unable to get a first down. That doesn't justify the poor decision making. The likelihood that there would be more pivotal moments to challenge in a game that still had over 50 minutes of time remaining were pretty high. But I guess when you know your job is hanging by a thread nothing it's better to look good then be good.

**



Indulge me for a moment, will you? Even though the Browns' victory didn't generate much knowledge, there were Browns-related items of interest to ponder from Sunday. My favorite, though, revolves around the Chiefs in general and their head coach, Romeo Crennel, in particular.

I've been covering and writing about the Browns for over 6 years now, 6 mind numbing, infuriating, frustrating years. One of my earliest columns was entitled, simply, "Romeo Crennel Must Go." The Browns were nearly two years into the Crennel experiment and it wasn't going very well. What prompted the column was an embarrassing loss against Cincinnati in which Braylon Edwards went after Charlie Frye on the sidelines for some perceived grievance or another while Crennel looked the other way, perhaps eyeing up cheesesteak concessionaire, I'm not sure.

It was clear at that point that Crennel had lost the team and it was out of control. The Browns won only 4 games that season but stuck with Crennel anyway. The next season, with an easy schedule to manage, the Crennel-coached Browns went 10-6 but didn't make the playoffs. If you think a 9 punt game in which your team still wins is rare, research how many 10 win teams haven't made the playoffs. Only in Cleveland. Of course the Browns regressed to their norm the following season and won 4 games. That's when Randy Lerner finally fired Crennel.

Personally, I always liked Crennel. He's genial. He's a gentleman. He cares about his players and coaches. He's a good defensive coordinator. But the one thing he's not is a head coach. He lacks the organizational skills necessary to pull together an entire franchise. Fans who think Shurmur looks clueless on game days must have short memories because Shurmur looks like Dick Vermeil compared to Crennel. I bring all this up because of what's happening in Kansas City right now.

As the Chiefs stumbled through another loss on Sunday, Crennel was asked why, with Brady

The Things We Know--Week 8

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM - Last Updated Monday, October 29 2012 7:35 PM

Quinn as their quarterback, they didn't simply hand the ball off to Jamaal Charles, their only offensive threat, more than 5 times. Crennel, honest as a politician isn't, shrugged and said he didn't know. What's great about that answer is that it just shows how little Crennel has changed.

When he handed over the reigns of the Cleveland offense to Maurice Carthon, Crennel was asked almost weekly why the Browns did this or that on offense when the more obvious call would have been that and this. Crennel then, just as now, shrugged and said he didn't know. He meant it then and means it now. He really doesn't know what's going on with his team, particularly if it's happening on offense. Once a defensive coordinator, always a defensive coordinator I guess.

The other great thing about the Chiefs is a stat that says that despite their one win this season, they've not lead once in regulation all year. I'd say that's a surprising stat, indeed, a rare stat, but I just got done writing about the Browns punting on the last 9 possessions of a game in which they had 10 possessions total and still won.

Meanwhile, all of this just goes to show why general managers get fired. Chiefs general manager Scott Pioli let himself get sucked into thinking that the Browns of the Crennel-era were better than their 24-40 record would indicate. They weren't. It's a decision Pioli will regret because when Crennel is fired, perhaps before season's end, Pioli will be likewise looking for work. Maybe he'll find it in Cleveland.

**

The Browns play the Ravens next week and it's a chance to pick up their second straight win against a AFC North rival. The Ravens are rested but beat up and aren't as good as their record. Of course, either are the Browns. Maybe it will be sunny