

Running In Place

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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In his Monday afternoon presser, Browns coach Romeo Crennel insisted the team was making progress, just not in that pesky win column. In his latest, Gary Benz questions that proclamation. He takes a closer look at this years six division games against last years six AFC North games. And what he found was clearly not "progress".



“Progress might have been all right once, but it has gone on too long.” Ogden Nash

We are on the cusp of another Cleveland Christmas and give Browns head Coach Romeo Crennel credit for one thing: he does know how to get fans in the Christmas spirit. During his latest Monday morning autopsy, Crennel offered reassurance that the Browns are making progress, even in the midst of losing their 11th game in 12 tries against their AFC North “rivals,” thereby giving everyone something to be thankful for this holiday season.

Although Crennel admitted that the Browns may not be making progress in the more tangible areas such as wins, he sees progress in the areas of “structural things” and how the Browns “want to do things.” Sure, a cynic might gently suggest, for example, that these are rather amorphous concepts that are difficult to measure. Maybe that was his point. But since it is Christmas, we’ll show some good will and assume that Crennel meant that progress is being made in the kinds of things that don’t show up in the box score, like hitting behind a runner on his way to second in baseball. Eventually, the theory goes that kind of play should translate into wins.

And that, of course, is where we find ourselves always, don’t we? Living, once again, for something good to eventually happen to a Cleveland team.

So, like Linus searching for the true meaning of Christmas, we’ll search for the true meaning of progress and hope, against hope, that it doesn’t end up like the search for the Great Pumpkin.

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Given the way football schedules fluctuate each year, one decent way to measure progress is to look at the constants. In this case, that would be the six games the Browns play each year against their “rivals” in the AFC North. (Quick aside: Putting “rivals” in quotes seem appropriate because, at this point, it is more concept than reality. Frankly, the Browns are rivals with the AFC North teams in the same way that Northwestern is a rival of Ohio State.)

By now, of course, everyone knows that the Browns have gone winless in their division for the first time in their history. And in the most appropriate of honors, as they were doing so Sunday they also pitched a shutout in third down conversions as well. Thus, just on purely wins, as Crennel noted, there hasn't been progress. In fact, there's been slight regression since the Browns eked out a victory against Baltimore in 2005 on the last game of the year. (And no devaluing that meaningless win on the last day of the season with both teams playing out the string. A win's a win)

But since this franchise seems more concerned with the intangibles, we'll forget about wins and instead focus on “structural thing,” like points, yardage, turnovers, third-down conversions and the like to see whether there has been any progress evident during Crennel's two seasons. The good news is that we found the spirit of progress, if not actual progress. Unfortunately for the Browns, as is their want, no progress, spiritual or otherwise, goes unpunished. For every half-step forward taken, they took at least a half-step back in other ways.

In 2006, the Browns scored 75 points against their divisional rivals. In 2005, it was 77 points. Slight regression there. But the Browns gave up 157 points each of the last two years. No progress, but no regression either. Overall, they're running in place.

This year, the Browns have gained 1624 net yards against their “rivals.” Last year, it was only

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1480. Put this one in the progress column. But that success is short lived. The Browns have given up 2,498 yards this year as compared to 2,155. Definite regression. Overall, put this one, too, in the “running in place” column. See the trend?

Breaking down the yardage a bit further, this year, the Browns have rushed for 331 yards this year as compared to 418 yards last year. Not good. But by signing designated run stuffer and buffet line destroyer Ted Washington, the Browns have given up only 867 yards rushing, as compared to 980 last year. True, the Browns rivals are still averaging 144.5 yards rushing per game, but last year it was 163.3 yards per game, a 19-yard per game improvement! Put this one proudly in the “running in place” column.

Looking at the passing yardage, the Browns have had a healthy Kellen Winslow and Braylon Edwards all season. It's not a surprise, then, that the Browns have passed for 1293 yards this year, as compared to 1061 last year. More progress. Of course and unfortunately, our friends in the North have passed for 1581 yards this year as compared to 1175 last year. More regression. Call this one “running in place” as well.

Finally, in the statistics that often tell the real story of a game, turnovers and third-down conversions, the trend is no different. On the turnover front, the Browns are *only* -6 in the turnover ratio this year. Last year, they were -9. Progress, or sorts. But alas, there is the third down conversion statistics. Last year the Browns were successful 33% of the time on third down while allowing their rivals to convert 39%. This year, the Browns have only been successful a scant 30% while their friends in the North have been successful a staggering 50% of the time. Consider this a very shaky running in place.

Whatever one wants to make of this, the best that can be said is that in some ways the Browns have found a way to stop some of the bleeding. Still, this is a patient that's down two quarts of blood with only one quart left in the 'fridge. As fans we may not be privy to the structural and other things that Crennel must see as he measures progress, but by any way measurable and discernable, we're reminded of what Crennel's mentor, Bill Belichick was fond of saying, “we can only go by what we see.” Or, as that more prescient of seers, Bud Carson, once noted: “we've progressed to the point where we've stopped progressing.”