

TCF Writers NFL Kickoff Spectacular!!

Written by {ga=tcfstaff}

Sunday, September 08 2013 4:00 AM - Last Updated Sunday, September 08 2013 7:00 PM



What a treat you guys are in for today. Because not only do the Browns kick off their season today, but the TCF writing staff has put together a voluminous article expressing how they think the season will go and what they're looking for out of the Browns when the home town team kicks it off Sunday.

Enjoy!

Jonathan Knight

AFC East: New England

AFC North: Cincinnati

AFC South: Houston

AFC West: Denver

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AFC Wild Cards: Baltimore, Indianapolis

NFC East: N.Y. Giants

NFC North: Green Bay

NFC South: Atlanta

NFC West: Seattle

NFC Wild Cards: San Francisco, New Orleans

Super Bowl: Denver vs. Atlanta

Browns: 4-12

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I know that the last thing you want to hear this time of year is a downer prediction for the upcoming Browns season.

So let's get started.

Honestly, I think they'll be marginally better than a year ago and potentially lay the foundation for a .500 team in 2014. But switching to entirely new systems on offense and defense (yet again) will cancel out that progress in the 2013 win column.

The offense will be sporadically acceptable, and while the defense can't help but be better, it still won't be able to hang in there for an entire game.

Brandon Weeden will wind up with roughly the same passer rating as last year, Trent Richardson will miss at least six games to injury (thus obliterating the Browns' overall running game), and even with a half-dozen solid pass-catchers, the Browns still will be missing the playmaker they need when things get tight.

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Elsewhere, if Barkevious plays in eight games, let's call that a miracle, and by the end of October we'll have more appreciation for Phil Dawson than we ever did when he was here.

Bottom line, there are still far too many unwinnable games, particularly within the AFC North, where the Browns will likely go winless even with Baltimore and Pittsburgh dipping and Cincinnati somehow emerging as the clear favorite.

Al Ciammaichella

NFC East- Redskins

NFC North- Packers

NFC South- Atlanta

NFC West- San Fran

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NFC Wildcards- Seattle, New Orleans

AFC East- New England

AFC North- Baltimore

AFC South- Houston

AFC West- Denver

AFC Wildcards- Cleveland (yup), Indy

Super Bowl Match-up: San Fran-Denver, San Fran 31-17

Browns Thoughts & Projected Record:

We have a real coach. Whether or not he's a good coach is still to be determined, but the upgrade from Pat DURmur to a living, breathing, human football coach should be worth a couple of wins alone. The offense has a couple of skill players that can actually make a difference in Richardson and Gordon, and Little as a 2nd option could be productive. There are concerns at both guard positions, but the tackles and center are solid. And when you look around the rest of the league, who else is good enough to pencil in as a sure thing for a WC spot? I can reasonably see 8-7 going into the season finale against a 5-10 Pittsburgh squad with a chance for a playoff berth on the line. The Browns squeak by the Yinzers for a 9-7 record, and NE Ohio sweats through several tiebreak scenarios before finally celebrating the franchise's first playoff berth in over a decade.

That, or Weeden is what we thought he was, Chud's offense sputters and the Browns limp to a 5-11 finish as the fanbase continues to scream for a franchise QB and Cleveland sports radio tries frantically to hack into Bill Cowher's Zillow account in case he's shopping for homes on the west side.

Adam Burke

NFC East- The NFC East looks like a division full of underachievers. The Redskins have the best shot at winning it, but they go as RGIII goes and it took a seven-game win streak to erase a 3-6 start last season. With the Eagles in transition to Chip Kelly's offense, the Giants having tons of offensive line problems, and the Cowboys expected to hover around .500, this is

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Washington's division for the taking.

NFC North-□ Green Bay should coast to the division title in this mess. The Vikings overachieved last season en route to a 10-6 record and a wild card berth, while the Bears canned Lovie Smith and Marc Trestman's schemes would appear to have a difficult time translating to the NFL. The Lions will be improved with Reggie Bush as a safety net for Matt Stafford, but their secondary is still a mess. That said, with a weaker division overall, the Lions could be a surprise team.

NFC South-□ The Falcons showed big depth problems in the preseason, though they're probably the most complete team in this division. The Buccaneers are due for some regression and the Saints still have problems on the defensive side of the ball. One of this season's flavor of the month teams is Carolina, who should compete for a wild card berth, but they were just 5-7 in the conference last year and 3-9 before a late-season surge.

NFC West-□ This is, without a doubt, the best division in football this season. The 49ers will win it, but I could see both wild cards coming out of the NFC West with Seattle and St. Louis making the playoffs. The Seahawks have one of the last remaining true home field advantages in the NFL. The rest of the conference seems to have taken a step back, while the Seahawks should improve in Russell Wilson's second year and the Rams now have an offensive scheme that Sam Bradford is familiar with. The talent is strong at the skill positions for the Rams and the defense will improve with more sustained drives from the offense.

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NFC Wildcards- Seattle and St. Louis. It's incredibly rare to see both wild cards come from the same division, but that's what will happen this season. Keep in mind that the Rams weren't particularly good last season and still went 4-1-1 in the division, including a win and a tie against the Super Bowl runner-up.

AFC East- It's Bill Belichick's world and the rest of the AFC East is still living in it. It may be a 10-6 type year for Brady's team, but there are no viable contenders in this mess. The Bills will take their lumps with EJ Manuel, the Jets are a laughing stock, and the Dolphins are still in need of a lot of help. It will be a struggle for New England, but they'll have this thing locked up by default by the middle of November.

AFC North- The Bengals have the fewest problems of any team in this division and they'll grab home field for the first round of the playoffs for the first time since 2009. The Steelers continue to age and have been wrecked by injuries so far this season and Roethlisberger will certainly go down at some point. The Ravens are ripe for a Super Bowl hangover season and the Browns will assume their place at the bottom of the division.

AFC South- Will this finally be the year for the Houston Texans? The Colts will take a step back without the emotional ride of Chuck Pagano and the team went 11-5 in spite of a -30 point differential. The Titans and Jaguars may win seven games combined this season, so they're not going to be in the hunt. The Texans could avoid last season's minor collapse after starting the year 10-1 and losing home field advantage throughout the playoffs late in the year, which absolutely cost them in the second round against New England.

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AFC West- Like the Patriots, the Broncos will wrap this one up by default. The Chiefs look like an improved club and Andy Reid gives them some legitimacy at the coaching position. Alex Smith will be the best QB the Chiefs have had in quite some time, so they should be in contention for a wild card. The Chargers eliminated Norv Turner, but the problems run deeper than that and Dwight Freeney and Manti Te'o aren't fixing that defense. The Raiders are on the clock to select Jadeveon Clowney.

AFC Wildcards- The Ravens have some concerns, but they'll be good enough to put together a nine or 10-win season for a playoff berth. The Chiefs will also complete a drastic turnaround to make the playoffs. Arrowhead is one of the few places with a home field advantage and the Chiefs will pick up four wins against the Chargers and Raiders. With the benefits of a last-place schedule and more depth, they'll sneak in at 9-7. The AFC is very, very top heavy.

Super Bowl Match-up: Houston v. Atlanta. The Texans were 10-2 in the conference last season and it's even worse this season. They should go 12-4 or better and secure home field advantage throughout the playoffs. Similarly, Atlanta has the best shot at home field advantage. They are in the second-toughest division in football, but the 49ers have six extremely tough division games. The Packers are the only threat to home field, but they play the AFC North and have a very tough road schedule. Matt Ryan is nearly unbeatable in the Georgia Dome.

It will be a complete cluster-f of a Super Bowl, however, with two teams that reap the benefits of playing in domes and play the majority of their road games in warmer climates having to play outdoors in New York in January.

Browns Thoughts & Projected Record-

The Browns would have to consider a 7-9 season a major success, but it looks like another 6-10 year for the brown and orange. Brandon Weeden will continue to hold this team back as a guy that cannot make all of the throws and decisions required of a NFL QB. The back seven on defense is highly questionable, despite what looks like an improved pass rush. The schedule does set up nicely for the Browns, with all of their games in the Eastern or Central Time Zones, so travel will not be an issue. The road schedule is brutal, with only the game against the Jets in Week 16 looking like a potential victory. The home schedule is a little bit friendlier, but nothing is ever a given for the Browns.

The positive is that the team looks very competitive and has a lot of players that can make an impact in a game. But, the NFL is a passing league and the Browns are weak at WR and QB, making it very difficult for them to consistently win games. It will be a season of big plays on both sides of the ball and games should be entertaining, but don't expect more in the win column than the loss column.

Erik Cassano

NFC East- Giants

NFC North- Bears

NFC South- Falcons

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NFC West- 49ers

NFC Wildcards- Seahawks, Packers

AFC East- Patriots

AFC North- Bengals

AFC South- Colts

AFC West- Broncos

AFC Wildcards- Texans, Ravens

Super Bowl Match-up: 49ers over Patriots

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Browns Thoughts & Projected Record:

The good news heading into 2013: The Browns have as much offensive firepower as they've ever had in the expansion era -- maybe even more than the 2007 team. And that counts for a lot in today's NFL. Brandon Weeden has a big arm, receivers Josh Gordon, Greg Little and Travis Benjamin have big-time playmaking ability. Trent Richardson, while not a lithe, slender, greyhound-like specimen of a running back, is more than capable of being a pit bull, ripping, tearing and thrashing out yards between the tackles. The offensive line is among the best pass-blocking units in the league, anchored by a pair of Pro Bowlers in Joe Thomas and Alex Mack.

With Rob Chudzinski and Norv Turner embracing a vertical passing attack, and with the rules of the NFL game heavily skewed toward promoting passing and scoring, the Browns do have the potential to put some respectable point totals on the board, which could -- maybe should -- translate to wins.

The trouble, however, is the bad news heading into 2013, which is nearly everything else about the team.

In what has become a yearly ritual, the Browns head into the season with experience and depth

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issues across the board. They've already seen their running back depth completely vanish, thanks to season-ending injuries to Dion Lewis and Montario Hardesty. If and/or when Richardson ends up on the shelf, the running game is toast.

The defensive line is about the only area of the team not affected by depth issues at the moment. It's a deep, solid unit that appears to be making a nearly-seamless transition to Ray Horton's 3-4 scheme. But behind that is a load of uncertainty with the linebackers and secondary. The preseason lung bruise suffered by first-round pick Barkevious Mingo isn't helping matters. His return date is still uncertain.

Horton's attacking defensive scheme is a breath of fresh air from the bend-but-don't-break philosophy the Browns usually embrace. But a mad-dog pass rush leaves the defensive backfield vulnerable. The Browns will likely get more QB sacks, and maybe force more turnovers, but the cost of that could be a lot of watching the corners and safeties get burned in single coverage.

The QBs the Browns will face this year include Aaron Rodgers, Tom Brady, Joe Flacco, Matthew Stafford, Ben Roethlisberger and Andy Dalton. Joe Haden will be tasked with stopping arguably the two best receivers in the league in Calvin Johnson and A.J. Green. Just food for thought.

On special teams, the Browns will have new faces at punter and kicker. Spencer Lanning

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appears to have won the punter gig. Placekicker still didn't have a warm body as of Tuesday morning. And I'm not talking about someone to fill Phil Dawson's large shoes. I'm talking about a human being who registers a pulse. Both Shayne Graham and Brandon Bogotay got their walking papers after the final preseason game, leaving the Browns without a kicker.

By the time you read this, the Browns might have signed a kicker. Whoever he is will find himself all but pulling on his shoulder pads during the cab ride from the airport to the stadium. That's not a good start to the post-Dawson era.

Overall, I keep going back and forth on this team. They're not ready to contend. They're still on the bottom rung of a tough division. They can't absorb many more injuries and expect to remain competitive. But the offense looked good -- and I mean really good -- in the first two preseason games.

This team has the potential to eat up bad defenses. And they have a number of bad defenses awaiting them. They could outscore a fair number of teams on their schedule. But they could also melt like warm butter against the true playoff contenders they face. They face a number of those teams, too.

My barometer keeps wavering between 9-7 and 6-10. I'll split the difference and peg them a 7-9 team, erring toward the losing side just because it's the Browns and we can usually rely on bad luck intervening somehow. As unsteady as the kicking game is, they might lose a game or two

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on shanked field goal attempts.

Jeff Rich

NFC East- Redskins

NFC North- Bears

NFC South- Falcons

NFC West- Seahawks

NFC Wildcards- 49ers, Saints

AFC East- Patriots

AFC North- Bengals

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AFC South- Colts

AFC West- Broncos

AFC Wildcards- Texans, Steelers

Super Bowl Match-up: Broncos over Falcons (Manning rides into the sunset)

Browns Thoughts & Projected Record:

Losing Gordon hurts, even if for just two games, it's enough for me to dock them a projected win. I think Weeden is being guided better, and that probably goes without saying, but because there was no structure to his game a year ago, there are still some things that need to be worked out, things he got away with at Oklahoma State. A dark visor might help, but he can't stare down his receiver, unless it's a jump ball to Cameron, who might be the physical pass-catcher that he was projected to be. Richardson needs to be the work-horse he's supposed to be, can he stay healthy?

The defense seems ready to do work in the 3-4, and personnel was brought in to sharpen that front 7. My only question, why not get the right personnel to compliment Haden in the secondary? Special team doesn't seem like they'll miss Cribbs, but we still don't know who will be scoring the 1 and 3-pointers. Also, I'm not sure it will matter, not this season. I'm going with 6-10, which I consider the baseline, having dropped from 7 wins because of Gordon's mandated sabbatical. Definite sleeper potential here, nine wins not impossible, but obviously not likely

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either.

Chris Hutchison-

NFC East- Dallas

NFC North- Green Bay

NFC South- Atlanta

NFC West- Seattle

NFC Wildcards- San Fran, New York Giants

AFC East- New England

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AFC South- Indianapolis

AFC West- Denver

AFC Wildcards- Baltimore, Houston

Super Bowl Match-up: Atlanta vs.... Uh... Baltimore?

Browns Thoughts & Projected Record - The Browns are rebuilding for the 20th year in a row, as evidenced by the lackluster draft effort and miserly use of Free Agency, especially in the way many starting and key backup positions such as CB, S, ILB, G, TE, P, and K were not adequately addressed by either means. The Front Office is painfully aware that this team is still too talent/depth-deficient to make a serious run at postseason glory, so they've chosen to "develop" late round picks and undrafted free agents rather than prop up the system with aging short-term vets. It's a nice theory, but every regime before them since Butch has tried the same thing, and you know the results. I don't see how this will be any different. Projected Record: 6-10

Greg Popelka

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NFC East- Cowboys
NFC North- Vikings
NFC South- Saints
NFC West- Forty Niners

NFC Wildcards- Falcons and Seahawks

AFC East- Patriots
AFC North- Bengals
AFC South- Texans
AFC West- Broncos

AFC Wildcards- Ravens and Chiefs

Super Bowl Match-up: Broncos and Seahawks

Browns Thoughts & Projected Record 5-11

Look, I really consider myself to be optimistic about my sports (Cleveland/Buckeyes). It's September, and I remain on the Indians bandwagon, for crying out loud.

I love Norv Turner being here; I love Ray Horton being here. (And I do not care in the least that Mike Lombardi is in Berea.

Job title notwithstanding, his role is merely to be Joe Banner's girl Friday. ...went old-school on you there. Ask an elder.

Banner would know. Or Norv. Or the quarterback.)

I love that neither coordinator is afraid to use the word "attack." While fun, being aggressive and forcing the action may occasionally backfire,

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especially when the operative term appears to be "thin" (as in the defensive secondary, at tight end, and perhaps in the partial vacuum between the quarterback's earholes...).

Being entertained will be a refreshing change. And it would be great to go all Doug Dieken on you and "predict" a division championship for the Browns. Don't get me wrong- I love that guy. But the Browns have won 4 or 5 a year for so many years in a row that I remain in "show-me" mode in my expectation of wins. (Hey, want a prediction for 2014? Five and eleven. 2015? Five and elev- uh, let's see if the next quarterback inspires confidence in five wins.)

Seriously: the Browns actually won two division games last season – and four home games. That qualifies as improvement. Cynical fans might agree that they should have won more than five total games; maybe with the current coaching staff, they'll show they are ready to step up to around .500...

But year after year, they have proven themselves to be in the bottom ten percent of NFL teams. Yeah, I know the Steelers' (spit) O-line concerns threaten to cause an implosion for them on that side of the ball. And the Ravens (hoccch – spit) have lost their safety, their center, and their murder accomplice. And as Twitter had me nodding at the other day, the Bengals (ew) are never as good as they think they are (even when they think they stink). So the timing seems to be ripe for the Browns to begin to make a move.

This season, just get the wheel out of the ditch, Banner & co. People used to think Cleveland was a "sleeping giant" for the Indians? Shoot. If the Browns start scoring points, creating turnovers and winning games in a sustainable manner, the team's fans' explosion of enthusiasm will even surprise themselves.

Thomas Moore

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NFC East – New York Giants

NFC North – Green Bay Packers

NFC South – Atlanta Falcons

NFC West – Seattle Seahawks

NFC Wildcards – San Francisco, New Orleans

AFC East – New England

AFC North – Baltimore

AFC South – Houston

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AFC West – Denver

AFC Wildcards – Indianapolis, Cincinnati

Super Bowl Match-up: Green Bay vs. Denver

Browns Thoughts & Projected Record:

It's going to be an interesting season for the Browns, even by Cleveland standards.

There is a lot going on that makes me want to believe the team is finally heading in the right direction, starting with the team finally working to build a defense that isn't going to get pushed around in the AFC North.

Even if he has to play with just one functional lung, I've read too much about how good Barkevious Mingo is to not get excited to see him in action. It has been a long, long time since the Browns had someone on the front seven of the defense that other teams had to worry about (maybe Clay Matthews and Chip Banks?). It's not a big stretch to think that Mingo can be the type of player that keeps opposing offensive coordinators up at night.

Put Mingo into the mix with Paul Kruger, Jabaal Sheard, and a solid defensive line rotation of Phil Taylor, Desmond Bryant, Ahtyba Rubin and Billy Winn, and suddenly defensive coordinator Ray Horton has something to work with.

Of course, the Browns better be able to bring the heat on opposing quarterbacks (and stop the run well enough to force the other team to have to pass the ball), because half the defensive secondary is questionable at best.

Buster Skrine opens up the season as the starter opposite Joe Haden and Tashaun Gipson will line up next to T.J. Ward. How often and how long they will remain in those positions remains to be seen and, with the backups consisting of unproven players like Josh Aubrey, Leon McFadden and the coming-off-an-injury Chris Owens, there could be some long days on defense.

On offense, everything begins and ends with quarterback Brandon Weeden.

With Norv Turner calling the plays and a healthy Trent Richardson running the ball, we should know for sure by the end of the season whether or not Weeden is good enough that the Browns can fill other holes on the team for the next few years, rather than chasing yet another starting quarterback.

Of course, Weeden and Richardson have to make it though the season in one piece; a process that is harder than it should be because of the gaping hole at right guard caused by the injuries to Jason Pinkston and Shawn Lauvao. The Browns certainly can't predict injuries, but Pinkston did miss a large of last season with an injury and Lauvao is average on a good day; perhaps it would have been prudent to spend some of their \$29 million-plus in remaining cap space to turn a very good offensive line into a great one.

They also could have addressed the problem in the draft, but chose instead to basically sit out this year's draft for the opportunity to (possibly) participate in 2014. It's all part of a master plan, we're sure, and we should start seeing the results of that plan sometime in the future, but probably (most certainly?) not this fall.

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The Browns catch a break with the schedule this year, that much is certain, with the divisional rotation matching them up with the AFC East and the NFC North. Outside of New England, the AFC East may be as bad as the AFC West was last season, and if the Browns were allowed to switch to the East this season, they very well could finish in second place.

The NFC North is similar, with Green Bay being the class of the division and Chicago, Minnesota and Detroit all having serious question marks. Throw in dates with Kansas City and Jacksonville, and the Browns could maybe have done some things this season – if they chose to do so.

As it is, it's finally time for this franchise to have a little luck. They have severed ties with everyone associated with the Lerner ownership years, which should help balance out that they inexplicably brought back Mike Lombardi, and that is a big plus. The team will be more entertaining this year than we've seen in a number of years, not a high bar to jump, obviously when you consider the offenses run by Pat Shurmur and Brian Daboll, and that should help keep the fan base from getting too restless. The big question is how the team will do within the AFC North. It's extremely difficult to make any kind of progress when you go 1-5 in the division, but this could be the year the Browns remedy that.

So what will the final record be?

Let's give the Browns a split of the eight games against the AFC East and NFC North, so that's 4-4. If they want anyone to take them seriously, they have to beat Kansas City and Jacksonville, teams that were a combined 4-28 last season. Within the division, it's a lock that the Browns will get swept by at least one of the other teams in the division, but we'll give them a split with the other two.

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Add it up and that's an 8-8 record.

And the Browns head into 2014 flush with salary cap money and bloated with draft picks.

Which might not be so bad.

Jesse Lamovsky

NFC East – Dallas (Yeah, I know.)

NFC North – Green Bay (Last I checked they still have Aaron Rodgers.)

NFC South – Tampa Bay (I think the Saints have shot their wad and I get the feeling the Falcons have, too.)

NFC West – Seattle (I think the 49ers are going to struggle to score points regardless- not enough big-play threats- and if Kaepernick gets hurt they're in real trouble.)

NFC Wildcards – New York, San Francisco

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AFC East – New England (The stench wafting from the rest of the division will not reach Foxboro.)

AFC North – Baltimore (Too much championship experience in spite of the loss of Ray-Ray and Edward Reed.)

AFC South – Indianapolis (Andrew Luck does in his second year what Peyton Manning did in his second year- win the division.)

AFC West – Denver (The rest of this division kind of sucks. And the Broncos are good, even with a large bite taken out of their pass rush.)

AFC Wildcards – Houston, Cincinnati

Super Bowl Match-up: N.Y. Giants vs. Denver: Manning vs. Manning, baby. Get ready for two weeks of conspiracy theorizing that would shame Jim Garrison, as every play leading up to this matchup is combed for evidence that it was all preordained from the powers above.

5 Things I want to see from the Browns, and one thing I will see

1. ... the front seven come into its own. Like the offense, the defense is stocked with former high draft picks- six taken in the first two rounds (counting the injured Barkevious Mingo.) Cleveland finished a lackluster 23rd in total defense in 2012. They

upped their sacks and turnovers- impact plays- from 2011's illusory top-ten overall unit, however, and there is justified optimism going into this year. Big Phil Taylor is back healthy after missing half of last season, Paul Kruger performed well in the preseason, Jabal Sheard seems to be adjusting to his position change with aplomb and the front seven as a whole shows the ability to pressure the quarterback even without blitzes.

The fellows up front will have to play well, because the secondary is an adventure. Aside from Joe Haden- who needs to become an All-Pro caliber player in his fourth year- and the workmanlike T.J. Ward, the back end of the defense looks messy.

I'm not expecting anything other than inconsistency, at best, from this pass defense. But the group up front looks very intriguing. If the defense comes out and stops the run and creates consistent pressure on the quarterback, if Taylor and Kruger make the leap, and if Mingo comes back strong from his early injury, we could definitely have something here going into 2014, along with a clear mandate to improve the secondary.

2.... Brandon Weeden take command of the job.

Since 1999 only Tim Couch, Kelly Holcomb and Charlie Frye started the season opener in consecutive years (Frye playing out his last two quarters as a Brown in catastrophic fashion in the '07 opener against the Steelers.) Not exactly illustrious company for Brandon Weeden, but it illustrates Cleveland's ongoing quarterback upheaval. Weeden is the eleventh opening-day starter for the Browns since 1999.

Weeden's situation is a mixed bag. He operates behind one of the better pass-blocking offensive lines in football and there are six other first-or-second-round picks (counting Josh Gordon) in his supporting cast. The "cupboards are bare" excuse so lovingly employed in defense of other quarterbacks isn't available to Weeden. He has weapons. On the other hand, he turns 30 on October 14th and the new regime shows all indications of giving him a limited amount of rope with which to hang himself.

So he has to make serious strides this season. Percentages and totals must be up across the board. So must victories- another 5-10 record as a starter isn't going to cut it. Good news for him is that, with talented pieces around him and unquestioned number-one status, he'll have the chance. One way or another we're going to know most of what we need to know about Brandon Weeden after this season.

3.... the Browns to beat all three division opponents.

The House of Pain was in effect, y'all, the last time the Browns defeated each division rival at least once. It was 1992, the second season under Bill Belichick, when Cleveland beat the playoff-qualifying Steelers and Oilers as well as the lowly Bengals. Since then the Browns have been swept by at least one division opponent (if not all of them) every year, for two good reasons: the Browns are usually lousy, and the rest of the division is usually very good.

The rest of the division still looks good. Baltimore has lost a lot over the offseason but Joe Flacco came into his own last year and he's surrounded by a championship-tested squad that expects to win and knows how to do so. Cincinnati has assembled an arresting array of talent and is looking to take the next step after back-to-back first-round playoff losses in Houston. Pittsburgh is still, well, Pittsburgh.

It's going to be tough, of course, but they aren't going to the Super Bowl this year (again) so there's only so much else to hope for in terms of tangible results.

4.... the Browns humiliate the Steelers and have it be for real. 43-0. 41-0. 34-7. 41-9. These are four of the most embarrassing of a series of embarrassing results against Pittsburgh since 1999. All four were played at Cleveland Browns Stadium, the home away from home for the hated from Western PA. The rout at home with Terrible Towel-waving carpetbaggers taking over in the stands has been a regular feature.

But the worm has got to turn sometimes, and there's a chance for it to turn soon. The Steelers are as full of holes as they've been in more than a decade; a mess at running back, a questionable offensive line and a defense that creaks with age and infirmity. Ben Roethlisberger is still one of the better quarterbacks in the game, but he hasn't started all 16 games since 2008

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and doesn't possess the weapons he used to enjoy. You can never really count out the Steelers, but they certainly have the look of a team on the decline.

This year might see the chance at a little payback. Cleveland plays the Steelers twice in the last six games, including the season finale in Pittsburgh on December 29th. Usually those are recipes for humiliation, with a Steeler team gearing up for the playoffs meeting a Browns team mailing it in with a lame-duck head coach. But maybe, just maybe, Pittsburgh is the one to enter those final weeks with one eye on the tee times. It would be nice to see the rising Browns come into Heinz Field on the final Sunday and do unto the Steelers what the Steelers have so often done unto them.

5.... **the Browns break the streak.** The streak being five consecutive seasons of double-digit losses. Cleveland has gone 23-57 since 2008. Only the Lions, owners of a winless season in '08, are worse over that span. With the usual suspects in place- a shallow roster and unspent millions in salary cap space- the Browns could very well take it to six straight years in 2012.

But then again, they may not. A ton rides on the opener against Miami. If the Browns beat the Dolphins for only their second opening-day win since 1999 it can take the expected journey of this season in an entirely unexpected direction. Sure, Weeden is a cypher, the pass defense is Swiss cheese and the roster is paper-thin in spots. But you don't have to be any kind of complete team to go 8-8 in today's NFL.

So, 8-8? Nah- 6-10. I don't have a good feeling about the opener, and it'll all go from there.