

Three (Non-Quarterback) Things To Watch For This Sunday

Written by {ga=papabearjere}

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All eyes will be on Brandon Weeden during the Browns' season opener this Sunday at home versus the Miami Dolphins. Here are three other things to watch for:

1. Trent Richardson's Big Play Ability

Trent Richardson showed a lot of good things in his rookie season. He proved that he can be a tough runner between-the-tackles, he can catch passes out of the backfield, and he has a nose for the end zone inside the five (a very underrated skill). None of that was particularly surprising; those skills were all part of his profile when he came out of Alabama to be the third overall selection in the 2012 NFL draft.

Thing is, when you take a running back that high in the draft, it's not enough for him to merely be "good", not when the league is filled with great running backs picked in the second round or later. A running back picked in the top ten overall must be an exceptional player, a perennial All-Pro, and Trent Richardson did not meet that standard last season. It's fair to give Richardson a pass for last year due to the rib injury he played through as well as the general malaise of the Browns offense, but now it's time to see if Richardson has the ability to be a truly special running back.

So far in his short career, Richardson has shown himself to be a powerful runner, but last season he was reduced to a bit of a plodder, a guy who could gain the yards that were blocked for him, and maybe move the pile forward an extra yard or two. The key for Richardson is to show more burst in the hole and sharper cuts when he's out in space.

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The best running backs, the Adrian Petersons and Arian Fosters of the world, can run over smaller defenders and make bigger defenders miss. Right now, Richardson is one-dimensional in that he can only run through defenders, not make them miss. In order for Richardson to have the kind of long runs the Browns so desperately need, he'll have to show some ability to cut sharply in the open field and make defenders miss. That will be the difference in whether he is closer to Adrian Peterson or BenJarvus Green-Ellis on the running back spectrum.

2. The Pass Rush

The hiring of Ray Horton as defensive coordinator and the switch to a 3-4 defensive front will mean the Browns' defense will be much different than the 2012 iteration. Horton's calling card when he was with Arizona was constant blitzing of the quarterback. The Cardinals under Horton were the second most blitz happy team in the NFL, sending five or more pass rushers [42.3 percent of the time](#) (Houston was first at 46.9 percent).

It will be interesting to see how much of Horton's aggressiveness carries over with him to Cleveland. Normally, it's best to try and get pressure on the quarterback by sending just four pass rushers, thus allowing the defense to drop seven defenders into coverage. But Horton

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seems to prefer to scheme pressure using exotic blitz packages rather than relying on individuals beating their man off the ball to get to the quarterback.

This is worrisome because more men sent at the quarterback means fewer dropped into coverage. It's no secret that the Browns are [weak in the secondary](#), and constant blitzing will put a lot of strain on the defensive backs to cover receivers one-on-one.

Against the Dolphins this week, I expect to see a lot of blitzing because Ryan Tannehill is a quarterback who is still learning how to read and adjust to NFL-caliber defenses. But when the Browns play quarterbacks like Aaron Rodgers and Tom Brady later in the season, the high percentage of blitzes will put the secondary in an untenable position. The Browns have completely revamped their pass rush with the additions of Jabaal Sheard, Paul Kruger, Barkevious Mingo, Desmond Bryant, and Quinton Groves, and it would be nice to see if the Browns can rely on talent rather than scheme to pressure the quarterback.

3. Special Teams

One exciting development from the preseason was the deployment of Travis Benjamin returning punts. Although he was a fan favorite, Josh Cribbs simply wasn't the same high-quality return man last season that he was early in his career. Benjamin brings quickness and shiftiness to the return game that differs greatly from Cribbs' more physical style. Benjamin's slight stature and ability to make defenders whiff on tackles makes him an ideal fit as a return man, and he should be able to set the Browns up with great field position this Sunday.

The obvious worry regarding special teams is new kicker Billy Cundiff. The Browns [curious tact](#) in dealing with Phil Dawson is well documented, and unfortunately the front office's statement of intent when it comes to the kicker position has put the Browns in a tough spot on that front. With Brandon Bogotay on IR and Shayne Graham proving he doesn't have the leg strength to get the job done, the Browns have gone from having one of the top kickers in the game to having a career journeyman. Here's hoping Cundiff gets off to a strong start this Sunday, or else it may not be long before we see another kicker donning an orange helmet.

Jeremy Klein is an unabashed Cleveland Sports fan who is frustrated with himself for not picking [this guy](#) for his fantasy football team. You can follow him on Twitter [@PapaBearJere](#).

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