



At some point the Cleveland Browns had to sign a kicker. Billy Cundiff, it's your turn in the box. Thankfully they signed Cundiff before Sunday's kickoff against Miami. But it was always iffy whether they'd get it done, wasn't it? With the Browns, where hope has been its only strategic plan for more than a decade, it's never wise to presume anything.

When Joe Banner took over as president of the club, his hiring signaled not just the end of Mike Holmgren (thankfully) but of Phil Dawson as well. Banner, as curmudgeonly of a sports executive as you're ever likely to

see, doesn't like old kickers, even kickers who have are 7-7 outside of 50 yards the past two seasons. He doesn't think they're worth whatever it is to keep them around, even on a team with an offense that tends to stall at the opponent's 30 and relies on 50+ yard field goals like hookers rely on conventions.

That meant that Dawson wasn't going to be resigned short of agreeing to play for free and maybe that wouldn't even have done it. Dawson had been the team's MVP but let's not get completely wrapped around the axle on that small fact. It's not as if this team was top heavy in MVP types in the first place.

So the fact that Dawson was expendable and thus expended and the Browns entered their opening week without a kicker isn't so much what grinds the average fan, though it grinds them still the same. It's the fact that the team's ham handed approach to filling one of the more critical roles on a team that can't otherwise score reveals that for however hard you might scrub the walls in Berea with the newest, bestest detergent the stench of incompetence doesn't get removed that easily.

I don't care that Shayne Graham wasn't the answer and rookie Brandon Bogotoy was injured or whatever. Those things happen. But cutting them both without having another kicker on the roster? Is that really how good, efficient, smart teams handle such things? Would it have killed them to sign another kicker first? Do they always have to look like boobs in how they go about making and executing personnel decisions?

And while that bit of stupidity made the new regime look like the old one and the one before that and the one before that, the real story of this team continues to be its lack of depth. That more than anything will keep this team from progressing.

How do we know it lacks depth? Put it this way: if you cut 7 players in order to get down to the league mandated 53 players and then go ahead and cut 7 more after that just to sign 7 cast offs from other teams it doesn't say much about the back end of the roster, which is exactly what the Browns did last week. It also doesn't say much about the people making the decisions in the first place.

Isn't all of this what fans were hoping would be avoided when Jimmy Haslam bought the team and with that swept Randy Lerner and Mike Holmgren out of town?

The Browns have 9 undrafted rookie free agents on the roster. That may be slightly higher than most teams, but not significantly so. Every team fills out the back end of its roster with undrafted free agents. It's the cheapest most efficient way to manage the salary cap. More broadly, though, well more than half the active roster on this team is first or second year players. That doesn't just scream youth. It screams lack of depth.

The Browns find themselves once again one of the youngest in the league. The roster turnover was again massive. There may be better starters on this team then in year's past, but what

separates teams is roster depth. Starters get injured every game. In order to compete you have to have experience backing those starters up. The Browns don't. Again.

When you look at the current Browns' roster, it's fairly deep on the defensive line and that will certainly help. It has to. The defensive backfield is thin, New York runway model thin. That means that Ray Horton's blitzes have to pay off because as we've seen in seasons past, when the defensive line can't get pressure and the linebackers don't blitz, Buster Skrine is only marginally better than Buster Bluth. Joe Haden can't do it all and T.J. Ward has to stay healthy.

The right side of the offensive line remains in flux and there is no credible running back behind Trent Richardson. He simply has to stay healthy to mask the gaping deficiency the Browns have at quarterback. Everyone likes Brandon Weeden's arm. But he's second tier talent at best, prone to flashes of competence and streaks of incomprehensible decision making. Weeden's age isn't working in his favor, either. Behind him is Brian Hoyer? Jason Campbell? Does it matter? Neither is more than a stop gap, but then again that's their role.

See the pattern? For whatever talent lies in the starting line up it serves only to underscore the significant drop off when it comes to the reserves. Given all this how can anyone expect this team to win more than 5 games? Certainly Vegas doesn't. The over and under for wins is 4.5, and that sounds about right.

Perhaps it will all work out one of these days. Dumb luck suggests that at some point a winning program has to emerge. The problem with the Browns though is that they almost purposefully eliminate the chance of luck biting them in the ass by being so dumb about their roster in the first place.

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The other thing about the Browns lack of depth is that besides a few free agents to bolster the defense and the drafting of a now injured Barkevious Mingo, the Browns accomplished pressure little this off season, at least in terms of players.

They did, of course, switch out the entire coaching staff and instill new systems on both offense and defense, but from a personnel standpoint this season mostly hinges on the hope that last year's hope develops.

That's what makes the nearly unbridled optimism that many fans feel about this team so strange. The Browns have mostly done a great job at diminishing expectations and yet the fans feel as optimistic as ever.

Part of that is due, of course, to this just being a Browns town. The other part is the fact that the people who run the Browns are afforded a pass not given to any other team in this town, and perhaps the country.

For me, though, I'm going to trust Banner and company and assume this team is still a massive work in progress. You simply can't be as young and inexperienced as this team is and make plans for the playoffs.

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In the last decade the Browns have opened at home 9 times. They have a 1-8 record. From a purely statistical point of view, that doesn't give anyone much hope for a victory against Miami this Sunday.

For many teams past performance is not a good indicator of the future. For teams like the Browns it's a direct correlation.

Still if you're looking for a reason, any reason, to have some optimism about the Browns vs. Dolphins, look no further than the notion that every team in the NFL has flaws and gaps. There are no perfect teams just varying degrees of imperfect teams. It's just that fans in Cleveland tend to know their team's problems more intimately than, say, all the various problems plaguing Miami at the moment.

The Dolphins spent big to get receiver Mike Wallace, a speedster with a penchant for occasionally dropping important passes. Ryan Tanehill was a surprise last year as a quarterback the Browns passed on in order to get 29 year old rookie Brandon Weeden. But so

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much of the Dolphins' success hinges on Wallace becoming the superstar his paycheck suggests and Tannehill taking the next step. Just substitute the words "Weeden" for Tannehill and "Richardson" for Wallace and it's hard to distinguish between the potential of the Browns and the Dolphins.

And for most of the season it will be a similar analysis. Just for giggles, consider this year's sexy pick, the Cincinnati Bengals. Maybe they do take the AFC North but doesn't that depend, really, on Andy Dalton playing even better? Dalton is a decent quarterback but is he a top tier quarterback? It's hard to see the Bengals getting back to 10 wins because, ultimately, water finds its level and if there's something we know about the Bengals it's that they are nearly as poorly run of a franchise as the Browns.

You could go down the same road with the Ravens and the Steelers and even the Patriots but as I said, water tends to find its level. That's why, again, teams like the Browns, the Raiders and the Jets will end up with a steady diet of Don Criqui and Steve Tasker broadcasting their games.

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If you want a question to ponder about the Browns, how about this: How many games will Mingo appear in this season?