

The Numbing Sameness That is the Browns

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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In the numbing sameness that serves as Cleveland Browns openers, or the Cleveland Browns generally, the only good news was reserved for the delusional. The rest of the AFC North also lost the first week and thus, technically, the Browns lost no ground except, I suppose, in the wild card race. So there's that.

The popular spin following Sunday's route at the hands of a very, very average Miami Dolphins team was that the defense played well until it was worn down by the amount of time it had to spend on the field on an otherwise beautiful, low humidity first day of the season. Don't buy it.

Miami has a boat load of offensive problems and still managed to score 23 points, which isn't much when measured against conventional NFL standards but was 13 more than the Browns could muster. When you have Buster Skrine in your secondary, your defense can never truly play well. As Don Cricqui said during the touchdown pass from quarterback Ryan Tannehill to a wide open Brian Hartline, "the receiver there was able to get separation from Skrine." Get used to hearing that, often. Skrine is barely a legitimate nickel back on an average team. That he starts for the Browns is the alpha and omega of the team's myriad of problems. It lacks players who can make plays (Joe Haden and T.J. Ward come immediately to mind. There are others.) It lacks depth. It lacks heart. It lacks.

As for the Browns offense, which in its awfulness and mismanagement almost made me forget what was happening when the defense was on the field, Sunday proved yet again that until the Browns find a quarterback fans should not tire of being wrong about blaming the defensive

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breakdowns on the fact that the defense is on the field too much. The offense is that horrible to contemplate.

What the hell were Tom Heckert and Mike Holmgren really thinking when they drafted Weeden anyway? He's old by NFL veteran standards, let alone rookie or second year player standards. And that's the least of his issues. If the only requirement to play quarterback in the NFL was the possession of a strong arm, why not resurrect Akili Smith? For that matter, why didn't offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski just go with his gut and re-sign Derek Anderson?

The best that can be said about Weeden is that he's not a coach killer. That is, he's not the kind of player whose raw athletic skills and occasional flashes of brilliance commit a coach imprudently to spending day and night trying to devise a way to harness that potential into consistent performance until, at least, the coach finds himself out of a job due to poor judgment.

Instead Weeden is simply a middling talent, another in a long line of back up quarterbacks that the Browns have spent the better part of 12 years developing. He is occasionally strong armed and accurate. More often he's strong armed and inaccurate, befuddled by the simplest of defensive schemes and panicked by a blitzing defensive back.

It was said that Weeden was ill suited for the West Coast offense run by former head coach Pat Shurmur and that given Chudzinski's and offensive coordinator Norv Turner's track record, this would be a break out year. It was likewise said the Weeden operates best out of the shotgun, like he did in college. Both could still be true but I'm skeptical. Nothing Weeden did in the preseason, including his awful performance in the third preseason game, or as it's now officially known, "The Only Preseason Game That Counts," or in Sunday's game even hints at significantly better things to come.

Team president Joe Banner, who has spent his entire tenure thus far diminishing anyone's expectations about the fortunes of his team to the point where it would be easier if he just wore a shirt that says "We Suck. Quit Asking," said that the new offense is a work in progress and will evolve over the course of the season. The question is, will Weeden be a part of that evolution?

This isn't a call so much for either back up Brian Hoyer or Jason Campbell so much as it is a reminder that there's no reason not to play either one or all 3, in the same game, in the same

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quarter, even in the same drive. Weeden is no more an established starter than either of Hoyer or Campbell and isn't likely ever to be so what would be the harm? Or the difference?

There are probably a hundred reasons that the coaching staff can come up with to justify their misplaced confidence in Weeden and to rationalize what was abundantly clear to everyone else. The right side of the offensive line, with Oniel Cousins and Mitchell Schwartz, was simply incompetent. Greg Little still channels the decaying ghost of Braylon Edwards as he celebrates routine catches, lets balls go off his fingertips and into defensive backs not named Joe Haden or T.J. Ward hands on difficult ones. Josh Gordon, in absentia, was talked about as if he was Terrell Owens in his prime. He may be the team's number one receiver, but that's more by default than actual accomplishment. And of course there's the bizarre play calling that makes weirdly insufficient use of their best weapon, Trent Richardson.

Chudzinski may claim that the game dictated more passing because they were playing from behind, but that's just Chudzinski covering for Chudzinski (and Turner). The strong impression was that the Chud and Turd show was hell bent on proving the skeptics wrong about Weeden by forcing a game plan for which the he and the rest of the offense were ill suited to execute.

Consider the evidence. With just three minutes gone in the fourth quarter, Miami held a 13-10 lead. They then went on a 5 minute plus drive that extended the lead to 20-10 on a one yard touchdown run. At that point and only at that point could the case be fairly made that passing was the first, best and only real option.

To that point, though, Weeden had already thrown 35 passes! Richardson had run a mere 13 times! I'm using exclamation points because anyone reading this, just as I was writing this, should be both amazed and confused! Thirty-five freakin' passes for a team with a wildly inconsistent quarterback and an embarrassing selection of receivers. It's pure bullshit, frankly, that the game dictated that kind of massive imbalance between the pass and the run and for Chud to suggest otherwise is disingenuous. The truth is that Chud and Turd wanted to show how smart they were for believing in Weeden and all they actually accomplished was confirming how ill suited Weeden is to be a starting NFL quarterback.

The NFL can be a difficult game to navigate but it's not nearly as difficult as its practitioners often imagine. Richardson looked to be running well early on so naturally Chud and Turd abandoned it like their predecessors. Look, everyone wants an explosive offense, one that can score on every possession. That isn't the Browns and doesn't look to be anytime soon. What's

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wrong with shortening the game a bit by running Richardson until it's nearly beyond question that it isn't working? If you want to take pressure off a struggling quarterback and a defense that doesn't seem to have the conditioning to withstand even its first game, running the ball would seem the best option.

It's true that the Browns aren't going to get appreciably better overall until they make better decisions about the talent they choose to employ. It's also true that this team won't get appreciably better until the coaching staff stops thinking they're the smartest guys in the room. When you're number one pick is a supposedly elite running back, then just run the damn ball.

Meanwhile fans set giddy by irrational preseason exuberance unaccompanied by any objective reason for it are left with the deadening feeling of collapsed expectations and an anxiety-ridden future.

What do the Browns do with their quarterback situation? They've been a laughingstock for years with the revolving door that is that position. But until it's definitively or at least more positively solved it's questionable whether the Browns can ever be even a mere playoff team.

The Baltimore Ravens, the Browns' next opponents, won a Super Bowl with Trent Dilfer so it's possible that a strong enough running game and a strong enough defense can paper over the team's glaring quarterback issues and get to a point where at least it's not so damn hilarious and depressing to ponder the playoffs.

But even if Chud and Turd go against their collective wont and become more run-oriented in their approach, eventually this team will have to find its own version of Joe Flacco.

Look, there's reason for hope. There always is. It's just hard to find obscured as it is by the numbing sameness of a team that knows not of success but only of unrelenting disappointment. It's going to be another long season.