

Browns vs. Vikings - Week 3

Written by {ga=tommoore}

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The Cleveland Browns head to Minneapolis on Sunday to take on the Minnesota Vikings, with each team still looking for its first victory on the season.

The Browns leading rusher on the season will miss the game with a thumb injury and in his place we will see Brian Hoyer make the leap from inactive third-string quarterback to starter.

In typical Browns fashion, the team made more news off the field this past week with the promotion of Hoyer and the trade of starting running back Trent Richardson than it has so far through two games of the season.

It's been quite a year so far, hasn't it Browns fans?

The Opposition

Minnesota's record: 0-2

Offensive rank: 20th overall/20th passing/10th rushing

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Defensive rank: 29th overall/26th passing/24th rushing

All-time record: Minnesota leads, 10-3

Last meeting: Vikings won, 34-20, in Week 1 of 2009

Injury report

The line: Browns +6

What to Watch For

The Browns rush defense has been solid through the opening of the season, allowing just 59.5 yards per game (tied for third in the NFL) and 2.0 yards per carry (tied for first) through two games. We should find out on Sunday if those numbers are the just the result of playing against weaker opposition or if the Browns are finally figuring out how to defend the run as they face Adrian Peterson.

Peterson is currently third in the NFL with 193 rushing yards and has scored two rushing touchdowns – or one more than the Browns have scored total this year. The last (and only) time the Browns faced Peterson, he ran for 180 yards and three touchdowns.

“He’s regarded as the top back in the league,” [defensive lineman Desmond Bryant told the team’s website](#) . “Obviously, that’s a great challenge for us. We’ve done pretty well stopping the run, so we hope to continue that. We’re out there trying to get as good a look as we can from the scout team, and hopefully, we’ll be ready for him this weekend.”

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In a bit of a surprise, the two defenders doing the most for the Browns in the run defense are defensive end Billy Winn and defensive tackle Ishmael Kitchen. [According to Pro Football Focus](#), Winn has recorded a stop in the running game on 18.9 percent of his plays, tops among 3-4 defensive ends in the league. Kitchen has posted a +4.2 run defense grade, good for fourth best among defensive tackles.

The Browns may be catching a small break, though, as Sunday marks the third and final game of Pro Bowl fullback Jerome Felton's suspension and a hyper-extended knee will keep his back-up, Rhet Ellison, out of the game. In their place the Vikings will choose between undrafted rookie Zach Line or tight end John Carlson.

Peterson has struggled this season without Felton, averaging just 2.0 yards per carry when the Vikings run out of a two-back set, according to ESPN Stats & Information.

While the Browns' focus on stopping the run is paying dividends, the defense still has trouble getting off the field on third downs, allowing a 50 percent conversion rate, and wearing down in the second half of both games as they have waited for the offense to get something – anything, really – going.

If the Browns can keep Peterson from having a big game, they may actually have a chance as Christian Ponder, not a very good quarterback to begin with, has been struggling this season. Through two games, Ponder has a quarterback rating of 67, has completed just 58.6 percent of his passes, and thrown twice as many interceptions as touchdowns.

On the Browns side defensive backs Buster Skrine and Chris Owens have been just as bad.

According to Pro Football Focus, opposing quarterbacks have a rating of 111.8 when throwing against Skrine, and when they get tired of picking on him they go after Owens (QB rating of 125.3), who has allowed 12 completions this year in 14 pass attempts.

“The people are going to look to their side and they're going to have opportunities to make plays

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to show what they can do,” [Browns coach Rob Chudzinski said of the less-than-dynamic duo](#) . “I see our coverage; I see the things we’re doing. We focus a lot on third down, which is an area on both sides of the ball that we need to improve on. But we’re making progress and what we need to do is take it from the practice field out to the game field.”

Clearly, something has to give on Sunday in the Ponder vs. Skrine/Owens stink fest.

OK, we’ve put it off as long as we could; we have to talk about the Browns offense.

Hoyer will be making his debut for the Browns on Sunday – his third team in his five-year career. Hoyer has started just one other game in his NFL career, and carries with him a career completion percentage of 59.4 in 15 games, two touchdown passes and three interceptions.

“Every situation is unique, and this is what I came here for,” [Hoyer said earlier in the week](#). [“You don’t come to be just a guy. Anybody who plays this position, in this league, they want to be on the field. There’s only one quarterback out there and you want to be that guy. If you don’t have that drive, you really don’t belong. When Chud told me the news \(about starting\), I was excited. You get anxious, and I think that really shows that you care about it.”](#)

Hoyer will be helped by the return of wide receiver Josh Gordon from a two-game suspension. The Vikings secondary is a bit shaky right now – corner back Chris Cook has allowed three touchdown passes this year and opposing quarterbacks are 14-of-14 when throwing at Josh Robinson – so there is hope the Browns could get something going in the passing game.

Joining Hoyer as a newcomer in the Browns backfield will be Willis McGahee, a soon-to-be 32-year-old running back who missed the final six games of last season after tearing the medial collateral ligament in his right knee and fracturing a bone in his lower right leg.

If McGahee struggles in his first game action since being injured, things could get interesting for the Browns. The other running backs on the roster are Bobby Rainey and Chris Ogbonnaya. Brandon Weeden, currently recovering from a thumb injury, is the team’s leading rusher with

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seven yards as neither Rainey nor Ogbonnaya has run the ball yet this season.

An Interesting Stat That May Mean Something

In three career games against Minnesota, McGahee has rushed for 192 yards on 55 carries (a 3.49 yard per carry average) and two touchdowns.

The Prediction

After the week the Browns had it will be nice to focus on the game for three hours on Sunday. And it certainly doesn't hurt that the team is on the road this week.

It's hard to see how the Browns can actually pull out a win against the Vikings, however.

There is no way of knowing what the team will get from the running game, and there is virtually no one in the NFL not name Mike Lombardi who thinks that Hoyer is a starting NFL quarterback.

Minnesota has problems of its own and, under normal circumstances, could be beatable by a Browns team that was playing to its potential.

But that seems unlikely this week and it is not hard to envision the Browns keeping the game close, but the Vikings putting together a late drive featuring Peterson to lock up the win and the cover.

Take the Vikings and the points.

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Record this year picking the Browns: 1-1

(Photo by Getty Images)