

The Numbing Sameness of it All, Again--Midweek Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Friday, October 04 2013 4:13 PM -



The Cleveland Browns and their fans find themselves in the oddest place, which is first place in the AFC North. Lest you think god is smiling with them he's not. He's laughing at them.

In a week that started with an amazing confluence of events that brought fleeting joy to the sports fans in these parts has ended in a confluence of events that more than anything confirms exactly how much God really does hate Cleveland sports.

Sure the Indians went on a 10-0 run to end the season and grab the top seed in the American League wild card play-in game. But that was just a way to suck fans into the false conceit that this could be their year. It's never their year. The middle of the lineup went 0-16. Asdrubal Cabrera, in front of Gods and countries, demonstrated exactly how much he's regressed since the last time the Indians were in the playoffs and then Nick Swisher, everyone's Nick Swisher, first failed to lift a ball out of the infield and then struck out on 3 straight pitches to kill the last flicker of a chance.

The Indians got plenty of hits, 9 to be exact. But not a single one came when it mattered and like the Browns team of several seasons ago that won 10 games and didn't make the playoffs, the Indians were done before they started and the jaded fans that had repacked Progressive Field to remind everyone how it used to be were left wondering exactly what kind of menace the front office would bring in the offseason.

Your first place Browns can't seem to lose for winning or, more accurately, lose for losing. It's clear what God intended. Joe Banner just hasn't been around long enough to recognize the forces he's battling. He had a plan, damnit. He had a plan.

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The team he inherited, the one Mike Holmgren and Tom Heckert built, had the following characteristics: a first round 29-year old rookie quarterback; a first round running back who can't seem to average more than 3 yards a carry or stay healthy; a substance abusing wide receiver who is one step away from getting kicked out of the league; another wide receiver who can't catch; and, of course, Buster Skrine, the worst cover guy in NFL history (slight exaggeration that!) anchoring of sorts the secondary.

It took Banner no more than one regular season game, though he waited two, to assess what he had. This team would have to be disassembled, piece by piece. Banner would sell off what he could and discard what he couldn't. Stockpile draft picks and get a quarterback who when he's 29 will have been in the league for 7 years. And the plan was working.

Banner took advantage of a desperate Indianapolis Colts team and extracted a first round pick (!) for Richardson. If it were any team other than the Browns on the receiving end of that trade, I'd immediately declare it the most one sided trade since Dallas went all in for Rickey Williams. But it is the Browns, a team that has made high art of squandered draft picks.

Still, a good start. With no running attack and a quarterback with no fast twitch skills, a losing course was set. Wait 'till next year, again. Just sit back and let the rest of the league come to you.

Then as almost luck would have it Brandon Weeden injured his thumb. If having a first string Weeden is critical to a losing season then imagine how delicious it must have been to Banner to use a back up quarterback for a good part of the season. But just to leave no stone unturned Banner had the team use the third string quarterback instead. It's as if Banner, who resembles the Grinch anyway, was in his cave rubbing his hands together, talking to his dog.

But the Who down in Whoville didn't get the message. Brian Hoyer, waiting, learning from the masters old school way, jumped into the fray and ignited an offense that had been moribund since the word moribund was invented. The improbable victory against the Minnesota Vikings looked like an outstretched middle finger to the front office. Then came the victory against the Cincinnati Bengals, a team with high playoff hopes. The game was boring, sure, but Hoyer rallied in ways that Weeden could never imagine and the Browns ground out a very professional victory.

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Two straight and the smacking sound you heard all the way to Green was Banner slapping his head with his palm. The two game win streak energized the fan base who, even if the Indians were in the middle of winning game 7 of the World Series by 5 runs, would still flood local sports talk shows with questions about the Browns.

Banner's plan was unraveling faster than the plot of a Kate Hudson movie. With that as the backdrop, the Browns entered into Thursday night's game against the Buffalo Bills not exactly sure where they stood. The fans were just as confused.

Order seemed restored early on when first Greg Little, who has the decision making skills of a 10-year old in a trading card store, fielded the opening kick from 9 yards deep and returned it 18 yards, pinning the Browns on their own 9 yard line. Hoyer then hit Josh Gordon in the hands on what should have been about a 70-yard touchdown pass on the game's second play. Naturally Gordon dropped it. The ensuing punt was returned well by the Bills who found themselves with a short field, made all the shorter when Joe Haden interfered with Steve Johnson in the end zone, setting up a short touchdown and a quick 7-0 Buffalo lead.

On the Browns' second series, Hoyer scrambled for a first down and in true Cleveland fashion, tore his ACL and ended his season. Weeden trotted in, looking as effective as he had before his own injury, and the Browns quickly punted. This led to a Buffalo field goal and now a 10-0 lead. The rout certainly seemed on.

Just as Banner was secretly celebrating Weeden's return and the return of his master plan, something strange happened. Once again the Browns rallied around the beleaguered Weeden and he found what amounts to sea legs. True Weeden more or less looked as he always has. He holds the ball like he's afraid he'll never get it back and moves in the backfield as if he was driving with the brakes on. Those deficiencies aside, he was able to play nearly effective enough.

Weeden will forever be defined by 57 yard return that gave the Browns the ball at the Buffalo 31. A short pass fell incomplete. A run went nowhere. A third down pass fell incomplete but the Bills were penalized for unnecessary roughness. A Weeden sack and a few incomplete passes later the Browns were settling once again for a 30-yard field goal. Lather, rinse, repeat.

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What Weeden will rarely be defined by is the next drive, an interminably long affair that started at the Browns 12 and ultimately ended in a game tying touchdown. It mostly featured the running of Willis McGahee enabled greatly by the return of Shawn Lauveo at right guard. It was tedious at times and nerve racking at others. It was not clear until it happened that McGahee would get that final yard. He did and the Browns were tied. Fah who for-aze. Dah who for-aze.

After a defensive hold, Travis Benjamin took the Bills punt 79 yards and the Browns were now winning, 17-10. Games do turn quickly, usually against the Browns. This was a through the looking glass moment.

In the third quarter, the Bills scored twice and were now up 24-17. The first was a 54-yard touchdown run by C.J. Spiller against a defense that apparently featured no defensive backfield. Once Spiller made it past the line he could have run sideways to the end zone so alone was he. The second was nearly a carbon copy of the Bills' first touchdown, set up by interference in the end zone. The only negligible difference was that it was T.J. Ward who committed the penalty.

The game was turning predictably back, except it really didn't. As suddenly as the clouds returned and the rain began to fall, figuratively and literally, Gordon turned a short pass from Weeden into a 37-yard touchdown. Another should have been touchdown turned into a chip shot field goal courtesy of a poor run from the 1-yard line by McGahee and a wildly inaccurate pass to tight end Jordan Cameron.

Still another Cundiff field goal was followed by a pick six from Ward on a pass from the Buster Skrine of quarterbacks, Buffalo's Jeff Tuel, and the game was over. Final score, Browns 37, Bills 24.

Let me pause here for a moment to stop picking on Skrine. In truth, he played probably his best game as a professional, and probably his entire life, on Thursday night. He was mostly where he was supposed to be and that's a major accomplishment. Haden, on the other hand, seemed lost. Maybe he's trying to do too much given the shortcomings around him, but against a better team and a better quarterback Haden would do well to pay attention to his assignments and not try to do others as well.

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Now back to our regular programming.

Weeden wasn't anything special on Thursday night. He was only 13-24 for 197 yards. Yet he wasn't awful at least awful as defined by Banner's expectations of him or those of virtually everyone else that have followed his brief, flatline trajectory as a starter.

Now the Browns are firmly entrenched for another week at the top of the AFC North. It is a highly winnable division because there isn't a dominant team among them. Heck, the Steelers might go 0 for the season. Yet you get the sense that Banner can't possibly be happy with this outcome. It doesn't completely devalue the power the Browns will yield in the draft but if this winning stuff continues it does diminish it.

So in any sense, large or small, God really does hate Cleveland sports. If he didn't, the Browns would have a lock on the first pick of the draft, the Indians would be playing the Red Sox this weekend, Hoyer would be healthy and Bernie Kosar wouldn't be trying to find a creative defense for the DUI he got last weekend.