

## What to Make of the First Place Cleveland Browns?

Written by {ga=tommoore}

Sunday, October 06 2013 2:19 PM - Last Updated Sunday, October 06 2013 4:36 PM

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When the Cleveland Browns beat Buffalo on Thursday night it guaranteed that the Browns will remain at least tied for first place in the AFC North once Week 5 is completed.

Quarterback Brandon Weeden came off the bench for injured starter Brian Hoyer to rescue the Browns – as well as a Cleveland fan base that was still reeling from the Cleveland Indians losing the Wild Card play-in game to Tampa Bay.

Weeden rallied the Browns from a 10-0 first-quarter deficit to give the Browns a 17-10 lead at halftime, then, after the Browns fell behind 24-17 in the third quarter, put up 10 consecutive points to help secure the win.

And he did it all after entering the game to a chorus of boos from fans who thought they had seen the last of Weeden after he injured his thumb in the Week 2 loss to Baltimore.

The good news is the Browns have now won three consecutive games for just the second time since 2007. (Both of those times came in seasons that ended with 5-11 records, but we're trying to be positive here so let's pretend we did not bring that up.)

Their 3-2 start is also the team's best since 2001, when they also started 3-2 along their way to a 7-9 season.

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The bad news is the team has lost Hoyer for the remainder of the season as he suffered a complete tear of the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee on a first-quarter scramble that saw him slide extremely awkwardly. (We would have thought that Tom Brady would have taught him the proper sliding technique, but there you go.)

The worst part is it may not really matter who is at quarterback the rest of the season.

A lot has happened in just five games for the Browns. What happens over the final 11 games of the season depends in large part on how three storylines play out.

### Couch vs. Holcomb – The Sequel

Was there any doubt in any Browns fan's mind when Hoyer went down that it was going to be something serious?

Browns coach Rob Chudzinski confirmed on Friday that Hoyer will have season-ending surgery after an MRI confirmed the injury.

“(Brian) did a great job stepping in and really showing what he could do with his opportunity,” [C hudzinski said](#)

. “It was huge for us. This is disappointing. He was a big reason why we won those couple of games, but not the only reason. That’s how we look at it. (QB) Brandon (Weeden) I think stepped in and took over and really, the guys rallied around him. It was a gutsy performance. It wasn’t always pretty. I think he was still a little bit rusty, but he got the job done and he was able to help us win that game. Obviously that was a big game for us.”

At least Chudzinski didn’t use the phrase “teeny-tiny” when describing the injury.

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So now the Browns are back to Weeden as the starting quarterback, at least for now. In just five games this season, the fans have gone on a roller-coaster ride of high expectations, to confusion over the trade of Trent Richardson, to jubilation over the play of Hoyer; so is it any surprise that Weeden is now back under center?

The thing is, it may not matter if it is Weeden or Hoyer on the field – at least as far as this season is concerned.

Hoyer captured everyone's fancy by beating Minnesota and Cincinnati and, just as importantly, by not being Brandon Weeden.



The biggest difference between the two quarterbacks is that Hoyer makes a decision and gets rid of the ball quicker, which helps explain why Hoyer has only been sacked eight times in 96 pass attempts, compared to the 16 sacks Weeden has taken in 110 drop backs.

But that does really equal better production from the offense with Hoyer under center?

In the games against the Vikings and the Bengals, Hoyer led the offense to an average of 20.5 points per game, completing 59.7 percent of his passes and converting 45 percent of the team's third-down opportunities.

Against the Bills, Weeden, in the only game he has started with the same offensive weapons as Hoyer, led the Browns to 23 points, completed 54 percent of his passes and converted 44 percent on third down.

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Take away the fact that one quarterback is named Hoyer and went to high school in Cleveland, and the other one is named Weeden and has become in many fan's eyes the poster boy for the perceived failures of the previous regime, and answer this question honestly:

Aren't those basically the same two quarterbacks?

This is not a defense of Weeden, nor an indictment of Hoyer, but just the realization that the Browns are revisiting the Tim Couch vs. Kelly Holcomb quarterback battler all over again.

It seems pretty clear that Weeden is not the long-term answer at quarterback. We were willing to write off the problems of his rookie season because he was playing in Pat Shurmur's offense and hoped a change to Norv Turner's NFL offense would make a difference.

But the same problems that plagued Weeden last year – slow decision-making, staring at his intended receiver – are still present and it doesn't seem like they are going away. Weeden is still able to make some plays because of his strong arm – he was 5-of-7 for 104 yards and a touchdown on passes of more than 10 yards against the Bills – but at this point Weeden is what he is.

As for Hoyer, our fear was never was never that he would play well, but rather than he would play just good enough for the front office (and the fans) to think he is the answer at quarterback.

Hoyer has shown that he is a serviceable quarterback, one that could be a valuable asset to the Browns – as the No. 2 quarterback. While Hoyer is (marginally) better than Weeden, the goal here is not to just find an alternative to Weeden, but to find a quarterback who can lead the Browns to a championship. And Hoyer isn't the answer.

The same goes for any free agent quarterbacks currently on the market. There has been some talk that the Browns should sign former Tampa Bay quarterback Josh Freeman, but to what end? Freeman isn't the answer and, again, the goal here is to get a championship quarterback

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in place, not just replace Weeden.

And how likely is it that the quarterback the Browns need to win a title is currently among a list of unemployed players?

While you never want to see a player suffer the type of injury that Hoyer did, if it had to happen the injury occurred at an OK time for the Browns.

With 10 days until their next game, the coaching staff has some extra time to rebuild Weeden's confidence and work out a game plan that he is comfortable running. Five games into the season the coaches have a better understanding of what the offense can and cannot do and they need to get Weeden on board with a plan to maximize the talent around him.

Weeden is not the answer in 2014 or beyond, but for the next 11 games he is the Browns best option at quarterback.

### **Born to run? Not so much**

Through the first five games of the season, the Browns rushing attack has been virtually non-existent, which makes the team's 3-2 record even more of a surprise.

The Browns have only faced one rushing defense that is in the Top 10 in the NFL and have put up these depressing numbers:

- Week 1: 3.6 yards per carry
- Week 2: 3.3 yards per carry
- Week 3: 6.1 yards per carry
- Week 4: 3.0 yards per carry
- Week 5: 2.8 yards per carry

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The Browns are currently 26th in the NFL in rushing with 79 yards per game (pending the outcome of the rest of this week's games), are 24th in yards per carry at 3.5, have just one rushing touchdown (only St. Louis is worse), and their longest run from scrimmage came from a back-up safety on a fake punt against Minnesota in Week 3. That run, along with Josh Gordon's 22-yard rush, helped skew that totals for that game.

The Browns only have three rushes of more than 20 yards this season and only one of those has come from an actual running back.

The woes of the running game were on full display late in the second quarter of Thursday's game against the Bills. The Browns had a first-and-10 at Buffalo's 12-yard line. Three Willis McGahee rushes netted just eight yards, but the Browns were saved by a Buffalo penalty. The Browns moved to first-and-goal at the 1-yard line and it took McGahee three tries to get that one yard for the Browns first rushing touchdown of the season.



McGahee, the Browns leading rusher, is averaging 2.6 yards per carry and 42 yards per game. Spread that out over 16 games and McGahee would end up with 677 rushing yards, the lowest figure to lead the Browns since the immortal Boyce Green ran for 673 yards in 1984.

Bobby Rainey hasn't been any better, rushing for just 2.8 yards per carry and showing why he was cut twice in training camp by the Baltimore Ravens.

While it is true that teams do not have to put up huge rushing numbers to be successful in the

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modern NFL – six of the top 10 rushing teams were a combined 7-16 going into this weekend's games – you don't have to be able to run the ball when you need to.

We are already into October and the recent run of 80 degree days are going to soon come to an end. The Browns don't play a single warm-weather game in November and December and once the weather turns nasty, the thought of Weeden (or someone) throwing the ball 50-plus times a game does not fill us with much cheer.

We understand the long-term value of the Trent Richardson trade. Even if the No. 1 draft pick the Browns receive from the Colts turns out to be lower in the first round, they can still get value from that pick either by selecting a player or by using it in a trade. (And by trade we don't mean trading it for a pick in 2016 or some other distant draft).

But short-term the trade left the running game in much the same situation as the passing game.

Like Weeden, Richardson became a symbol of the mistakes of the Mike Holmgren/Tom Heckert era in Cleveland. Many fans point to the fact that the Browns are winning without Richardson (while ignoring the fact that the Colts are winning with Richardson) as proof that Heckert left the Browns a mess. Of course, we never hear about those mistakes when Travis Benjamin is returning a punt for a touchdown, or when Josh Gordon and Jordan Cameron are catching touchdown passes.

At least in Hoyer's case, the quarterback play improved – even if it was a slight improvement. The same cannot be said of the running game, no matter how much fans want to try and twist the numbers.

At some point this season the lack of a running game is going to cost the Browns and fans won't be able to blame Richardson for it. Losing another game or two probably doesn't hurt the Browns – higher draft picks and all – but it's time to accept that McGahee and Rainey are not the answer, which is OK as long as the front office knows that.

**A defense we can all get behind**

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Coming into the season we were excited to see what defensive coordinator Ray Horton did with the Browns defense.

And so far we haven't been disappointed.



For the first time since the Browns returned in 1999 (only a slight exaggeration), the Browns are actually able to defend the run like a real NFL defense. And the defense is a unit that Browns fans actually want to see take the field.

We know!

The Browns are currently fifth in the NFL in yards allowed (301 per game), eighth against the run (94 yards per game), and ninth against both the pass (207 yards per game) and in points allowed (18.8 a game). They are also tops in the league with 18 sacks.

Digging deeper into the stats shows the Browns are giving up just 3.3 yards per carry, leaving them just a shade behind league-leader Arizona. The only real negative is that the Browns have given up a league-worst eight rushing touchdowns – but they have balanced that out by giving up a NFL-low two touchdown passes.

“I think they're taking a sense of ownership and a sense of pride, and it's something that they

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want to show statistically that they are doing better,” [Horton told \*The Beacon Journal\*](#) . “I think they want to show it’s not just a fluke. It’s that we’re working hard to get better.”

The best part about the defense is that it’s not just one or two players making things happen, but seemingly everyone is stepping up to make a play. For example, while Desmond Bryant leads the team with 3.5 sacks, 13 different players have recorded a sack, meaning the offense has to worry about more than one player.

During the off-season, after the Browns drafted Barkevious Mingo and signed Bryant and Paul Kruger in free agency, we had to laugh when speculation was thrown around that the Browns would be trading (or in one case releasing) players like Jabaal Sheard and Phil Taylor. The thinking being that the team didn’t need any extra depth on the defense.

Thankfully the front office is smarter than that because with injuries the past few weeks the Browns have needed every able body they can get on defense.

The Browns faced a high-powered offense so far or any high-end quarterbacks – Andy Dalton has probably been the best of the bunch and, well, he’s still Andy Dalton – but that is going to change pretty quickly.

The next two weeks the Browns will face Matt Stafford and Detroit before traveling to Green Bay to face Aaron Rodgers. New England and Tom Brady are still on the schedule, as are two games against Pittsburgh’s Ben Roethlisberger (we can’t wait to see the Browns match up with that offensive line) and a home date with Baltimore and Joe Flacco, a quarterback the Browns have yet to beat.

So there are tests coming, so in some ways these first five games were the prep work for those tests. Even if the Browns haven’t faced the toughest of competition so far, the confidence level of the defense is high and that could go a long way when the quality of opponent moves to another level.

**Yeah, about those uniforms**

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We are not a fan of the monochrome look when it comes to NFL uniforms.

So when the Browns took their team name to the extreme and came out against the Bills in a uniform that matched their brown jerseys with corresponding brown pants, we were less than enthused.

It's just not a good look and it messes with what is one of the nicest uniforms in the league.

If the Browns ever decide to pair the brown jersey with pants that are not white, then the orange pants are the only acceptable alternative.

### **Time to wrap it up**

Say what you will about the Browns, but things have definitely not been boring so far this year.

The AFC North is currently wide open, with Pittsburgh in shambles at 0-4, and the Bengals and Ravens just sort of there threw the first weeks of the season.

It seems unrealistic to think the Browns could actually make a run at the division title, but after watching the team go from Weeden to Hoyer and back to Weeden, to trading away Richardson, to dealing with injuries on defense, and still putting together a three-game winning streak, anything seems possible.

"I can't say enough about the guys and what they've been able to do, how focused they've been," Chudzinski said. "You're really seeing an identity develop of this team. It's a lot of guys going out to do their job, playing together. They're relentless, they don't flinch. I can't say enough about the guys in the locker room and how they feel about each other and how hard they play for each other."

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“You don’t see an offense versus a defense, or where you have these divisions, or position or side of the ball. Everybody is just real positive. You see guys supporting each other from the opposite sides of the ball and they rally around each other. It’s a good thing to have when you’re in a team sport for sure, a lot of young guys who are learning how to play and getting better as we go.”

The Browns have made some nice improvements so far this season. How much improvement they have left this year remains to be seen.