

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

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, October 15 2013 5:00 AM - Last Updated Monday, October 14 2013 7:56 PM



Football, as in life, is all about balance. In that sense then it's no surprise that the Cleveland Browns found themselves at 3-3 after a 31-17 shellacking at the hands of one of the NFL's most interesting teams, the Detroit Lions.

It's hard to know whether the Lions are good or just looked that way Sunday. In fairness, the Browns have become somewhat of a cottage industry when it comes to making other teams look good so it's always hard to judge the level of competition. Still a team with Matt Stafford and Calvin Johnson is a team worth looking at occasionally.

But we're not here to praise the Lions and we're not here really to bury the Browns. It's about balance, remember?

So in the interest of balance what this team and its fans know after 6 games is that Brandon Weeden is 0-3 as a starting quarterback and the team is 3-0 when he's not. That's balance, right? The trouble is that the Browns have little choice at the moment but to continue starting Weeden which can only mean that the heady feeling new head coach Rob Chudzinski had after a 3-game win streak is about to become a pounding migraine the likes of which everyone of his predecessors in Browns 2.0 has felt on most Sunday evenings.

Part of the context of Sunday's loss was borne just a week ago, the Thursday night win against the Buffalo Bills. The unfortunate, season-ending injury to Brian Hoyer resonates but not as much as the marked difference in what Hoyer brought to the team vs. what Weeden has to offer.

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Though Hoyer's play was limited in the Bills game, his brief moments, coupled with his play the previous two weeks, crystallized why Rob Chudzinski likely has the chance to succeed where Pat Shurmur and company failed. It also crystallized why Norv Turner may not be much of a head coach but he's a real asset as an offensive coordinator.

Hoyer has a quicker mind and a quicker release. Those are two traits needed in any offense by any quarterback, certainly, but what they illustrated best as executed by Hoyer was both the innovative quality of Chudzinski's plays and Turner's play calling and how those things can be leveraged to effective use even on a team with a suspect set of receivers and a running back who more resembles Jamal Lewis in the last throes than Adrian Peterson in his prime.

It was a fun team to watch. Wins help but so does just the possibility that not every series will end in a punt unless it first ends in an interception.

Weeden came in to relieve Hoyer last Thursday and made a decent, almost workmanlike accounting for himself. He didn't do enough organically bad to lose the game. He was important in the win, in fact.

But there is a much different Weeden in the midst when he appears as a starter. In the first half of Sunday's game against the Lions, Weeden at first resembled the Weeden of last week's Buffalo contest. He executed just well enough so that fans could appreciate, for once, the real benefits of a clever offensive coaching. Travis Benjamin's 45 yard end around was a bit of a spark of course but more to the point there was a decided rhythm to what was happening on the field as the Browns built a 10-point half time lead.

Then whatever fluids Weeden took during the half returned him to the form that fans have become frustrated by. With Weeden at the controls, the offense is turgid. His execution on even the simplest passing plays is as crisp as month old lettuce. He holds the ball like he's afraid the refs won't give it back to him when the play is over. It almost doesn't matter what Chudzinski and Turner draw up. They know it's a crapshoot whether or not it can get executed with any sense of precision.

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I suspect that Weeden's career in Cleveland will last only as long as it takes for team president Joe Banner to heed the cries of Chudzinski and Turner to find someone, anyone who can play better than Weeden. Banner's faced tougher tasks. Making sure there are enough beer vendors on game day comes to mind as one. Until he's gone though Weeden will surely be defined by his fourth quarter interception that absolutely sucked the air and the crowd out of FirstEnergy Stadium late in the game.

In the pantheon that constitutes interceptions, let's acknowledge first that except for the interception that a defensive back absentmindedly makes near his team's goal line on a ball thrown from the opposing 35 yard line on 3rd and 20, there is no such thing as a good interception. But there are degrees of bad.

The pick 6 tends to be at one end of the continuum, the desperation heave at the end of the first half at the other. But every once in a while there is an interception so puzzling in its construction, an interception so visually abhorrent, that it causes you to question the meaning of life. Weeden's interception on Sunday, the second and not the first, was just such an interception.

It's brief life belies its everlasting impact. It showcased nearly every wrongheaded element of Weeden's ill considered switch from baseball to football. The game was still in the balance. The Browns had just absorbed a 51-yard field goal by David Akers that put them behind by 24-17. Greg Little, maybe the single worst kickoff returner in the history of the game, fielded the ball 5 yards deep in the end zone and decided to run it out, relying apparently on the same gut instincts and decision making that caused him to lose his senior year of college. He returned it to the 16 yard line.

Let's pause for a moment and focus on just this small point.

One of the things that make bad teams bad is poor decision making by mediocre players. Little has repeatedly put his team in a bind by fielding kicks deep in the end zone. Lacking either the trait of top speed or the skill of elusiveness, Little struggles to get the ball out to the 20-yard line under even modest circumstances. When he took the Akers kickoff 5 yards deep in the end zone, these weren't modest circumstances given the lateness of the game.

You could almost see the thought bubble dancing above Little's head. "This is when players make plays," he appeared to be thinking. The problem is that between thought and deed he has no filter. Little is not a "player" in that sense of the phrase. He can't catch and he can't field

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kicks. Seizing the moment, Little did what Little does and returned it to the 16 yard line. If there is any quarterback in the league who needs to be put in a hole less than Weeden, stand up and defend your choice.

But there was Weeden, asked to put the team on his back, march 80+ yards and tie the game. Two of the first four plays were positive. There was a 15 yarder and later an 18 yarder to Josh Gordon that put the ball on the Lions' 44 yard line. Then panic set in.

Weeden went back to pass and was pressured by former Browns defensive back C.J. Mosely among others. Weeden already struggles to make good decisions when he has time. He has almost no natural instinct on how to handle the rather common occurrences of pressure. Moving around the pocket with the footwork of Bernie Kosar, Weeden had long determined he wasn't going to be able to complete a pass downfield. He also had determined that he didn't want to take a sack.

At that point the standard quarterback playbook calls for a pass out of bounds. Rolling to his left, Weeden would now be required to throw across his body to get the ball out of bounds. According to his dissection afterward, Weeden supposedly decided to throw the ball enough over the head of running back Chris Ogbonnaya and, apparently, out of bounds. I say apparently because I'm not sure Weeden is being perfectly candid. I think he tried to muscle the ball to Ogbonnaya with a semi side arm shuffle of a pass that ended up sailing harmlessly out of Ogbonnaya's reach and gently into the arms of DeAndre Levy who immediately was tackled.

It was no pick 6, but that hardly mattered. There were barely 4 and half minutes to play and the Browns were done to death. Stafford piled on with another touchdown pass, this one a 10-yarder to Josph Faurier, for what turned out to be the final measure of victory. It was the culmination of 24 straight points against a team that was struggling just to get first downs.

The interception wasn't necessarily unexpected. With Weeden such can never be the case. But its suddenness hit with every bit the same force as the double play ground out from Asdrubal Cabrera's against the Tampa Bay Rays in the wild card game. It was the clarity of the moment that the Browns had reverted to pre-Hoyer form that sent the fans scurrying for the exits like they had just contracted food poisoning. Weeden's play is making fans sick.

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You could lay some blame for the defeat at the feet of the defense and that wouldn't be wildly off the mark. Entering the game cornerback Joe Haden said that the match up against Calvin Johnson, which didn't really materialize as much as anticipated due to Johnson's injuries, would allow Haden to measure himself against the best. Haden's two pass interference penalties in the first quarter are the better measuring stick. They led to Detroit's first touchdown.

But this too is where balance comes in. The defense was on the field most of the second half because their counterparts on offense were incapable of anything resembling ball control. They were tired if not dispirited. The Browns' first four possessions of the second half were all of the 3 and out variety. The fifth possession featured the Weeden interception. Then came a mop up possession to end the game which comically ended when Weeden, needing to throw into the end zone instead dumped off a 1 yard pass to tight end Jordan Cameron. I suspect that wouldn't have been Tom Brady's first choice or even Brady Quinn's or even Quinn the Eskimo's.

As an overall matter, the Browns being 3-3 isn't cause for futile screaming in the wind. It's better than most anticipated. Yet why does it feel like 10 games from now the final ledger won't look so balanced? It's because Browns fans know this movie better than anyone. The likely outcome, indeed the expected outcome now is that the Browns will still be standing at 3 wins as Chudzinski tries to explain in a post season press conference why he and his charges deserve another year at the helm.

Chudzinski will get his second year and likely more than that. It will come at the expense of Weeden who if he survives the season in tact, will be a pre-draft trade for a late round pick. And when Chudzinski gets the opportunity to balance his defense with the offense he's designed led by the quarterback he needs, the Browns for once and maybe more will end up on the right side of the ledger.