



There really is a numbing sameness to the Cleveland Browns, isn't there? It's not just the big things, like the way they lose each week. It's crept into the small things as well. Consider, for example, the following quote from quarterback Brandon Weeden and then guess when it was spoken:

"I was trying to throw a groundball to [running back Chris Ogbonnaya]. I just didn't want to take a sack there. My mistake."

If you guessed in the aftermath of the Browns desperate loss to the Detroit Lions a week ago, you'd essentially be right. If you also guessed in the aftermath of the Browns desperate loss to the Green Bay Packers on Sunday, you'd be absolutely right. Weeden is nothing if not self aware, two straight weeks. A mistake one week is still a mistake the following week. The problem is that clarity tends to be hours after it's most needed.

Weeden's second in as many weeks backhanded, underhanded, shovel call it what you want pushing of a ball ostensibly toward an eligible receiver as he's being dragged down by an opposing lineman, didn't cost the Browns a comeback attempt against the Packers like it did against the Lions. Weeden made sure the game was well out of reach by then. But what it did definitively establish was that Weeden has no capacity for lessons learned.

If you're head coach Rob Chudzinski, or offensive coordinator Norv Turner, or club president Joe Banner, that has to be the final "a ha" moment of Sunday's 31-13 loss. Whatever secret hopes any of them may have harbored for Weeden's success has effectively ended. One who can't learn can never improve.

Weeden seems to believe that nearly any act of desperation no matter how silly or ill advised is cover in the service of "leaving it all on the field." He said as much after Sunday's game and the previous Sunday's as well. It's a thought process shared by the insane and the incompetent. I fear that Weeden may be both.

If there's any way to blunt the utter frustration that Weeden inflicts on fans it would be that between the fans and the coaching staff there is no disconnect. Pat Shurmur, for example, had a vested interest in Weeden because it's the guy who his boss, the guy that hired him, drafted in the first round.

Chudzinski isn't so encumbered and it's been on full display from preseason forward. Chudzinski wouldn't fully commit to Weeden then and won't now. If Weeden starts next week it will be because Jason Campbell has slipped back into a coma.

Because there are no coincidences in sports, there was deeper meaning to be drawn from both Brian Hoyer's promotion over Campbell to take over when Weeden went down with a thumb injury and Chudzinski's willingness to give Weeden extra time to heal as a way of continuing to play Hoyer. At this point there's no doubt that had Hoyer stayed healthy Weeden would still be rehabbing his thumb. There's likewise little doubt that Chudzinski sees Campbell as much of an alternative except in the "what the hell how can it be worse" sense.

Weeden simply isn't the quarterback for this team and the reason is summed up nicely in the bookended passes to Ogbonnaya in the waning moments of the last two games. Where Weeden sees effort, his coaches see a quarterback who can't learn. Weeden has become Mike Phipps and the Browns and is inspiring his teammates to play with all the fire and competence of any of the 1970s teams.

Whether Weeden can be useful to any team is a different question entirely and something to ponder when next year's draft rolls around. But for now both Chudzinski and Browns fans will

have to endure the slings of Weeden's misguided and usually late arriving arrows. The first two passes Weeden threw on Sunday to Greg Little serve as exhibits 2,944 and 2,955.

As for Sunday's loss there is perspective to consider. It was never Weeden's game to win or lose and while his limited skills contributed as they usually do to another loss, there were others responsible as well.

Receiver Josh Gordon had the kind of game that someone with his personal resume will have on occasion. He had two catches for 21 yards and that came late in the game after the score caught up to the dominance that Packers were already demonstrating. Little, when there were decent throws to catch, had the kind of game that has become his stock in trade. He had 4 catches for 49 yards and at least as many misses for as many yards. Both Gordon and Little have much in common, starting with their selfish, me-first attitudes that limit their effectiveness.

Gordon and Little are good examples of why teams tend to favor signing what they call "high character" guys. Character only matters when pressure is greatest. The reason neither Gordon nor Little can be counted on to make the key plays that their physical talents would otherwise suggest is related to their low reservoirs of personal character. Under duress they fold.

Gordon's disappearance on Sunday was a little less expected than Little's but it derives from the same place. Gordon let his teammates down by being a multiple offender of the league's drug policy so an inability to put up a stronger fight for a tough pass thrown into traffic in a relatively important part of the game should not come as much of a surprise. Even Chudzinski essentially conceded in his post game comments that he thinks Gordon could have fought harder for the 4th down pass near the end zone early in the 4th quarter. Little just can't catch.

What is more disconcerting about Gordon and Little though is that given their flaws the Browns are probably going to have to move on without them next season. That's the right move in concept but in a team this flawed it creates even greater issues.

It's abundantly clear, for example, that this team has significant holes in its starting line up and little if any depth at any position. By luck and happenstance the receiving corps actually has legitimately talented receivers but that talented is limited in its execution. When a team like the Browns moves on from theoretical talent it just creates more actual openings that have to be

filled. This isn't the New England Patriots. There is no next man up.

Then of course there was the usual lack of running game. But how much that matters depends on how much one believes offensive coordinator Norv Turner likes to run the ball anyway. There's a strong case to be made that Green Bay jumping out quickly in response to Weeden's lack of same suggested that it could be a long day. In turn that would require a more pass oriented attack. But there's also a strong suggestion that Turner and Chudzinski always favor a pass oriented attack in what is clearly a pass happy league. Put it this way, there is no evidence to date that either Chudzinski or Turner favor a balanced attack. So blaming Willis McGahee for being old is like blaming Mike Holmgren for being conceited.

Not to continue flogging a mostly dead horse, but the flaw in Chudzinski's and Turner's offense is not its underlying theory but it's reliance on quarterbacking skills that Weeden simply doesn't have. That isn't to say that it's unreasonable in its expectations. It is to say it's incompatible with the quarterback they inherited.

Watching a game on television with its multiple replays tends to highlight what must be increasingly maddening film sessions inside Berea. Weeden favors tight end Jordan Cameron anyway but there were at least 3 times that Weeden didn't seem to see a wide open Cameron in the middle of the field because he was locked on a more difficult option. There were other times that Weeden did what he usually does and hold on to the ball until the receiver becomes inextricably covered by even modest defensive backs. And, of course, there were just the mystifying throws, the ones where he can't seem to get it in the hands of an outlet receiver hanging within 5 yards of the pocket. His touch on simple screen passes resembles Anderson Varejao's touch on lay ups.

To be fair, Weeden's touchdown pass to Cameron was well thrown. It was the kind of pass that suggests more. Yet it came after he missed Little on a slant in the end zone by throwing behind him. That too sums up Weeden and the Browns offense. Some starts but mostly fits.

With Weeden at the controls the Browns have regressed significantly on offense since the veritable salad days of Hoyer. Instead of the relative exciting mess that they were for about 3 games, they're back to the same turgid death march where 40+ yard field goals are the best one can hope for.

The Browns have definitely resumed the early season tailspin that got temporarily interrupted when Hoyer had the ball. If nothing else it also resumes the plan Banner hatched by collecting all those 2014 draft picks in the first place and puts them back in a dogfight with Jacksonville and the New York Football Giants for next year's number one pick.