

The Numbing Sameness of It All, Again--Chiefs Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The last bastion of a bad sports team, the sport doesn't matter, is when it begins to traffic in moral victories. The Cleveland Browns have been a bad sports team for more than a decade so it's use to counting its good losses as half wins. Undoubtedly a 23-17 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday has been put in the good loss column as fans and players grasp for anything positive to distract from the negatives of their reality.

Of course teams don't make playoffs, let alone with championships, by piling up a basketful of good losses. What they tend to get are regime changes every few years and early draft picks to squander. That's been the real story of the Browns of the last several season. None of the good losses of past seasons ever translated into much before so it's difficult to see progress by coming close against a team that hasn't yet been beaten this season.

The Chiefs were a two win team last year. Even accounting that it was a team then coached by Romeo Crennel and offensively coordinated by Brian Daboll, they may be 8-0 at this point but let's assess their worthiness once they play the Denver Broncos two times in three weeks in November. For now, the focus should remain squarely where it's always been and that's on the bumbling group of stumblebums wearing different combinations of brown and orange week after week.

If Sunday's game could be counted as progress of any sort, it would be to underscore the soundness of head coach Rob Chudzinski's brand of offense as coordinated by a guy who should never have left the coordinator's booth in the first place, Norv Turner. All it takes to come to that realization is to watch their game plan be executed by anyone not named Brandon Weeden.

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That's not good news for Weeden. Not by a long shot. Every time someone like Campbell can step in and look positively competent where Weeden looks positively befuddled hastens Weeden's exit and with it the closing of the incredibly misguided management style of Mike Holmgren. For a guy who claims to know quarterbacks, Holmgren's hit rate is as impressive as a suit from Men's Wearhouse.

To illustrate, Sunday, like that Sunday several weeks ago when Brian Hoyer took the start, showed that a quarterback of even modest accomplishment is a step change difference from Weeden, Holmgren's prized first round pick. And while Campbell is most certainly a decent sort trying to survive in a league that churns players like NBC sitcoms churn viewers, let's face it. At best he's a merely serviceable NFL quarterback. A player like him was readily available to one of the worst teams in the league for a reason.

Yet there was Campbell, who seems to have been around since the Reagan administration but in fact is just a year older than Weeden, throwing for nearly 300 yards and two touchdowns against a team that was averaging 5 sacks a game until Sunday. His quarterback rating was 105.4, which seems like about double of what Weeden's likely would have been. It was enough to get Campbell another start and Weeden another step closer to a backup job with another team.

What caused the Browns' latest good loss on Sunday was not quarterback failure. Instead it was another hole in the leaky life raft supports this team, this time in the form of two veterans who should know better, Joe Thomas and Davone Bess.

Thomas rarely comes under criticism and for good reason. He's as reliable as Dick Goddard forecasting lake effect snow. Thomas stepped into his left tackle position from his first mini camp and hasn't missed a game. He's made every Pro Bowl he's been eligible for because where every thing else about the Browns has been a disaster, Thomas has stood out in the most unusual way. He's been the exception to the otherwise ironclad rule that irrespective of who is doing the drafting, the Browns will blow their first round pick. (It's worth noting, if only to show how ironclad the rule really is that in the year Thomas was drafted, the Browns also took Brady Quinn in the first round. So there!)

Yet Thomas had two crucial holding penalties and a false start that had the simultaneously bad

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result of killing key late drives and burying the offensively challenged Browns into even deeper holes. It was more than Campbell and his minor core of skill players could ever hope to overcome.

Bess had a game that only two players in modern Browns history could both relate to and appreciate—Braylon Edwards and Greg Little. The difference though is that Bess wasn't signed because he had a reputation as a breakaway, Calvin Johnson wannabe. He was signed because he was a bargain bin version of Wes Welker. Bess is the possession receiver that's supposed to run the underneath patterns and hold onto balls, particularly in those third down situations where the faster receivers are being pursued by defensive backs while the rest are covered by linebackers.

Bess' drops in the first half were mostly irrelevant, just frustrating. It was his disastrous fourth quarter that will be remembered most.

With just over 7 minutes remaining and the Browns' defense continuing to tighten the screws, Bess fielded what looked like a routine punt. Indeed Bess caught the ball near midfield, if just for a moment. Suddenly he dropped it as if he were the focal point of the movie *The Longest Yard* and had made a special deal with the warden to lose to the guards. The Chiefs recovered. Though the Chiefs couldn't use that mistake to put the Browns away for good, it was enough that the Chiefs got another chance to punt a few minutes later pushing the Browns even further from a game tying field goal.

Where Thomas and Bess intersected is where the mistakes hurt the most. The game was over 57 minutes old and the Browns still down just a field goal. Campbell, who has a nice step up move in the pocket anyway, stepped up but couldn't find anyone open and scrambled 13 yards for a first down. Thomas' second holding penalty then nullified the gain and the momentum.

Bess killed it for good a few plays later. On 4th and 7, really the last opportunity to remain relevant in the game, Campbell scrambled, then scrambled some more. It was at that moment, more so than any other in the game, where my first thought was of Weeden. Watching Campbell move toward the sideline while still holding onto a ball that had to be thrown, I had two competing visions and they both involved Weeden. The first was of him simply running out of bounds to avoid the sack as if demonstrating at the most inopportune moment that sometimes it's best to take the sack. The second was of something even dumber, Weeden again flipping the ball to anyone wearing any colored uniform.

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What I got, what we all got instead was Campbell actually throwing the ball to a diving Bess just this much past the first down marker. It was exactly the kind of pass that earns one the moniker of "possession receiver" (well, that, and his relatively slow 40 time). But Bess couldn't secure the pass, leaving the Browns once again to chart a good loss.

It's hard to understand, except in the context of losing teams, why week in and week out a new goat emerges to undo any good accomplished. In some cases it's because a player, tired of losing, tries to work outside of his limited role in order to "make something happen." In other cases it's a character issue that reveals itself when character most counts. Still other times it's simply that a lack of talent has the maddening tendency to show up at exactly the wrong time. All of these are true of the Browns.

Weeden's not a major talent but what's inhibited his progress is the self-imposed burden he carries to lift the team beyond what he's capable of doing. Last week, Little and Gordon failed because they have an insufficient reservoir of internal strength and purpose of mind. And then there's simply the fact that the Browns have all the depth of a Katherine Heigl movie. They are what their record says they are.

There will be no celebrating a good loss because it hasn't gotten anyone, team, front office, coaching staff or fans anything in the past other than a slightly higher cliff off which to fall and the next inevitable bad loss. The Browns are in a simple business where success is easily measured. Unfortunately, so is failure.