



If Joshua Cribbs, the former Kent State quarterback, is the best player on your team, you don't have much of a team. Like it or not, that was the sad truth, among many sad truths about the Cleveland Browns. I'm really not trying to take anything away from the guy, nor do I believe I'm coming with a fresh concept here. At times, he sure was brilliant, and he may have won two or three games for the Browns in his eight seasons on the North Coast, but how much different would the fan experience of the Browns been, had Cribbs never suited up for the Orange and Brown?

Personally, I liked Cribbs, and it went far beyond the Kent State/Northeast Ohio connection. I thought he was a great addition to any team for his work on special teams, but I was always a bit skeptical about what he could actually contribute to the game from the line of scrimmage, where most of the game is played. Look, there's an understanding that a good return man can certainly make things easier for an offense in a game that's about field position, like the NFL, opposed to the arena game and a lot of today's college games that are more about possessions. Cribbs came to the aid of more than a few inept Cleveland Browns offense, either by awarding them a short field or putting points on the board himself, thus eliminating the charade of Brian Daboll and Pat Shurmur's Red Zone gameplan.

In all, he scored 20 touchdowns for Cleveland, but the Browns were 6-13 in games that he found the end zone. Eight of the twenty scores gave the Browns the lead, and one tied a close game at home against the Dolphins in 2011, a 1-point victory for the Browns. His biggest seasons as a returner came in 2007, when the team went 10-6; Cribbs had two kickoff returns for touchdowns in losses to Oakland and Pittsburgh, and a first quarter punt return in a

meaningless, yet victorious finale against the Niners. He had career highs in yards per return, on both punts and kickoffs, and 2,312 all-purpose yards, by far a career best.



Eric Mangini took over the team in 2009, and it was mostly a year to forget, except for the evolution of Joshua Cribbs as an offensive player. The returner-turned-receiver found the end zone a total of six times, broke a couple of records, and sparked one of the longest winning streaks of the sad rebooted era of the Cleveland Browns. He returned a punt for six, to give the Browns a first-half lead in Brett Favre's debut in Vikings purple, a game Favre's new team won, going away in the second half. A 98-yard kick return in Pittsburgh went for not in a 27-14 loss to the Browns one-time rival. Cribbs caught his second touchdown pass against Detroit in Week 10; good for four yards, it was his longest score from scrimmage at the time. That gave the visiting team a 24-3 lead at Ford Field, one that everyone felt good about, but of course the Browns would find a way to lose this one 38-37.

A few weeks later, a 1-11 Browns team gave a noble effort on what looked like the coldest night in the history of Cleveland on a Thursday night against those hated Steelers. It was and still is the best game of Joshua Cribbs career, not arguably the best, the very-best. With very little in the cupboard, a noodle-armed Brady Quinn and two running backs whose names aren't important, the gameplan was to see if the Steelers had an answer for Cribbs. He didn't score in the game; in fact, scoring was very much at a premium in this 13-6 prime time throw-away game on the NFL Network, but he set every score with 96 yards on 9 touches from scrimmage, including a big 37 yard run that setup the games only touchdown, a 55-yard punt return that setup a Phil Dawson field goal, and a Daniel Sepulveda shank that gave Cleveland the ball at the Pittsburgh 48 that set up another Dawson 3-pointer.

He joined the NFLN gang on-set on the field after the game, and Deion Sanders gave life to the monster that was, "PAY THE MAN!". To Cribbs credit, he was humble, and admitted it was hard

to talk about money in front of fan base that hadn't seen much winning from their 2-11 team at that point. They didn't lose another game, and 10 days later, Cribbs had two 6-point kick returns of 100 yards or more, the longer going for 103 in a 41-34 win over the Chiefs at Arrowhead. The team would close out the season with wins over Oakland and Jacksonville to bring their final tally to 5-11, Cribbs picked up his second career rushing touchdown in the season finale versus the Jaguars. At the end of the 2009 season, the Browns offered Cribbs a contact extension that superceded his existing 6-year deal that began in 2006, he was insulted by the \$1.4 million per year offer.

"It absolutely felt like the last time I'd be setting foot inside the building. I feel like it's over for me in Cleveland...I've been betrayed and stabbed in the back."

-Joshua Cribbs (January 7, 2010)

He'd eventually sign for 3 years and \$20 million in March of 2010, having been paid for his past accomplishments. In his griping to the media, his mouthpiece to the fans, he talked about being much more than a return man, so he got his money and took on a new role. The return game suffered, which is more on the shoulders of Browns management, led by Mike Holmgren at that point. As a returner, he didn't find the end zone and his yards per suffered on both kickoffs and punts. As a receiver, he had more a career-high 23 for 292 yards. As an athlete, 20 carries for 66 yards and 2 completed passes for a total of 19 yards, but he did manage to fumble the ball 7 times that season. His one touchdown was a brilliant 65-yard strike from Seneca Wallace to give the Browns a lead, which they of course squandered and lost the game.



The Browns successfully took their greatest asset on Special Teams and made him into a serviceable #3 or #4 receiver in 2011. We aren't trying to view 41 catches for 518 yards and 4 touchdowns from a sideways perspective, but he'd turned to puddy as a return man by that point. After the big score against the Dolphins early in the year, we might not want to see how

the rest of Cribbs' stats do under the microscope. He scored late in a 20-10 loss at Candlestick Park, then performed a choreographed routine and defended his actions with his post-game comments. That touchdown meant less to me than the meaningless fight in the stands between the guy in the Brady Quinn jersey and the guy in the Frank Gore jersey. One week later, Colt McCoy hit Cribbs on a short touchdown pass that turned a 30-6 game into a 30-12 loss; we'll call that a nice padding of the stats, but it was meaningless, for sure.

Cribbs did a lot of losing in a Browns uniform, but the last time he walked off the field victorious, he played a role in the outcome. His last touchdown as a Cleveland Brown came 16 months before his release, in the 4th quarter of the Browns 14-10 win over Jacksonville on November 20, 2011. It was a short-yardage situation, where Cribbs would often be at his most valuable in the passing game, and it gave the Browns a lead that they would actually hold onto. I pored through the game-logs in 2012, trying to find anything nice to say, and walking away feeling his release this March was completely justified.

In a sign of the changing times, Cribbs good-bye was not done in a full-page Plain Dealer ad, a la [CC Sabathia](#) and [Zydrunas Ilgauskas](#) , but on his own Instrgram account...



I proved I would die for this...



That I would give 110% every game.



That the community was just as important as the field.



So if its my time to go, at least it's in good hands.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjgW1sYmU4s>