

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

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Depending on one's perspective, the Cleveland Browns either never or always disappoint. For those watching long enough to know which way that particular wind blows, nothing much about the Browns 41-20 loss to the Cincinnati Bengals was particularly surprising or disappointing.

For reasons almost completely untethered from the reality of the environment, the Browns had briefly entered the national conversation about potential playoff teams. Ensnared in a division that suddenly has gone weaker than the Big 10, the Browns and found themselves near the division lead relatively late in the season while still sporting a losing record, as if.

The headiness of those modestly inflated expectations were well served in a first quarter that featured 3 Browns scoring opportunities and a quick 13-0 lead against a Bengals team that almost looked like it was playing scared, not loose. The planets realigned in a quick and jarring fashion.

Letting a team score 31 points in any quarter, indeed in any half, in football played at almost any level is a relatively rare occurrence generally reserved for the most obvious of mismatches. To see it happen at a professional level was stunning. The level of ineptitude a team must exhibit to allow itself to be tossed about like a Frisbee on a Saturday afternoon in the park is actually hard to describe. When the final points of Sunday's second quarter were tacked on by Cincinnati's Mike Nugent after the Browns frightful punt unit couldn't contain Adam Jones felt like piling on. The Browns were finished and they knew it. So did everyone else.

Remember, too, that this was the Cincinnati Bengals doing the piling on. The Bengals' record is

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better than it should be by virtue of the company they keep within the AFC North. It will surely continue to improve as they prance their way to a division title that no one else much wants. That doesn't mean that this is a good Bengals team.

Bengals head coach Marvin Lewis may dream of playing in late January but right now there isn't a playoff worthy team in the whole of the AFC that is worried about the Bengals. I don't expect that to change. The Bengals are simply too average in virtually every aspect of their operations to do much damage to talented or even modestly talented teams, as the Browns 17-6 victory against the Bengals earlier this season attests.

Sadly, the Browns aren't one of those talented teams. It's not so much that the Bengals game exposed the Browns as some have suggested. It's more that this Bengals game came at that point in the season where the highs and lows tend to even out.

If you want to be disappointed about something specifically in Sunday's loss then let it be the absence of any clamoring to have a clearly struggling Jason Campbell, a quintessential nice guy journeyman, replaced by last year's number one pick. That's the kind of disappointment that really lingers. Teams like the Browns can't afford to miss on first round picks and when they do they inevitably suffer untimely occasional drubbings at the hands of even lesser lights like the Bengals in subsequent seasons.

This isn't to say, however, that folks like head coach Rob Chudzinski will be so existential in their analyses. They already know about the holes. Chudzinski and his staff need to figure out why his team, which had two weeks to practice, played like it hadn't practiced in two weeks.

There were the obvious signs early, of course. The Browns did have that 13-0 lead but it should have been more, much more.

Consider, for example, the sequence that followed running back Chris Ogbonnaya's 43-yard run. On a first and goal from the 8 yard line, Willis McGahee got the ball to the 4 yard line. A penalty then put the ball on the Cincinnati 2. McGahee was able to get it to the one yard line but then two particularly lousy throws from Campbell made it 4th and goal at the 1 yard line.

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Chudzinski, who has not seemed particularly wedded to conventional coaching conservatism most of the season, got married in a hurry. He clearly cherished early points of a modest amount as paramount to the payoff of a low-risk gamble and kicked the chip shot field goal. It suggested if anything else that Chudzinski only gambles when the stakes don't matter. His Browns were in what he had been told was the most meaningful football game played in these parts in over a half a generation and so he decided that any points were better than none even if an unsuccessful 4th down attempt would have given the Bengals the ball at their own 1. Considering that the two most immediate runs had gained at least 1 yard each, it set the wrong tone.

A similar decision wasn't necessary a few minutes later when Joe Haden, who played wonderfully now twice against one of the league's best receivers, A.J. Green, had his first interception. Haden returned it to the 14 yard line but the offense couldn't move it beyond the 10. Again, conventional coaching conservatism says to take any points off a turnover, though truthfully but for the Ogbonnaya run the Browns hadn't shown any ability yet to execute a successful 4th and 6 anyway. Fourth and 1 a few minutes earlier was far more manageable. The easy call was made in the form of another chip shot field goal attempt and a disappointing 6-0 lead, assuming any lead can be disappointing, was acquired.

What this particular brand of lousy and conservative offense did was to actually provide the bounce, the springboard, to the dizzying 31 point second quarter that the Bengals slapped on the Browns. As bad as the start was for the Bengals, they had to look up at that scoreboard and think "at least it isn't as bad as it could be." When the half mercifully ended it was the Browns looking up at the scoreboard and thinking "that's as bad as it could be."

Though the two blocked punts (one was technically not a block because though it was tipped it garnered 7 positive yards) and the Jones punt return near the end of the half tend to make the game look as though it was a special teams meltdown, what Chudzinski will see as he replays the game over and over in his mind were all the little things, too, that were hallmarks of an unfocused, undisciplined team; things like fumbles, interceptions, false starts and holding penalties.

Even as the game spiraled beyond its control, the Browns never really did much to shake things up, particularly on offense. Likely the gravity of the game that pushed Chudzinski into a careful, plodding approach had an impact on players like Campbell.

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Looking almost nothing like the quarterback who had a better than 100 rating in his last two starts, Campbell repeatedly checked down to receivers hovering near the line of scrimmage. It was hard to tell whether the Bengals' secondary was just so good that no receivers could break open (unlikely) or that Campbell was just too scared to take a shot after throwing an early interception (more likely). Either way there was a point up until about the 74 yard touchdown completion that Campbell made to Josh Gordon early in the third quarter on about as well thrown of a ball as there could possibly be that Campbell was averaging less yards per completion than Jim Brown averaged yards per rushing attempt for his entire career.

To illustrate the point more forcefully, consider that after the pass to Gordon, Campbell attempted 27 more passes the rest of the game. A grand total of two of those were thrown beyond that series' first down markers and one of those two were intercepted. Giving due notice to the two sacks Campbell also suffered, that means that 23 of 27 passes attempted were intended to garner but a few yards vertically and perhaps more only if tackles were broken and one of those passes also was intercepted. Even with nothing to lose Campbell played as if there was.

Sunday's game, to the extent it was hell bent on proving anything, was that the Browns are still a franchise very much in the midst of still another transition. This particular version has already won 4 games which at this point in the season gives it a leg up on the various other versions that were tried but failed.

That is, I suppose, a positive but even as I ponder that thought I'm haunted really by another more disturbing one: that this franchise's high water mark is still measured by Romeo Crennel's 10-win non playoff season of 2007. With a record that dispiriting how could anyone really feel a lingering sting of disappointment after Sunday?