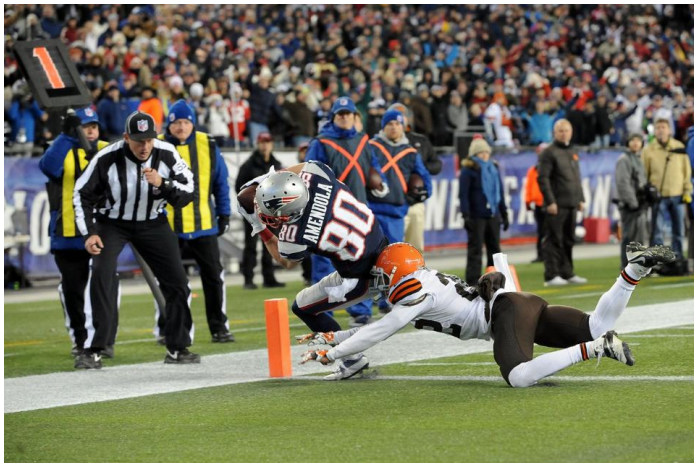


## The Numbing Sameness of it All, Again--Patriots Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, December 12 2013 12:00 AM - Last Updated Friday, December 13 2013 7:41 AM

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It should have been a story about how the Cleveland Browns stepped out of character to get what for this team counts as a signature win even despite being mired in its 9th losing season in the last 10. Instead it's just another story about how an out of character effort came up short for much the same reasons the Browns continue to come up short. The Browns lost, improbably it turns out, to the New England Patriots 27-26 mostly by yielding 13 points in the last 2:39 of the game. It might feel better to think the Browns deserved better and maybe they did, but they also likely got what they deserved.

After taking a 26-14 lead on a Jason Campbell 4-yard touchdown pass to tight end Jordan Cameron, the game appeared to be over to fans with a rooting interest in either team. Even Patriots fans, long used to late game heroics by one of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play had to take a measure of the context and conclude that this time the luck of their design would not arrive. At least it looked that way as fans headed to the exits to get an early jump on traffic. Those fans weren't the only ones fooled. The ones prematurely celebrating in Cleveland had their own head slapping moments. With just 2:39 remaining the Patriots had labored just to get 14 points against a Browns team that statistically if not actually, is one of the best in the league. Tom Brady seemed mostly frustrated all day as the secondary kept the coverage tight and the defensive line kept the pressure on. Indeed, the touchdown pass to Cameron felt like the final nail.

This Browns team needs more nails, particularly on defense.

Starting from their 18-yard line after the ensuing kickoff, the Browns' defense was a victim in the way so many others have been against New England. Brady did what Brady does. The Patriots' offense wasn't particularly effective all day but yet Brady was able to summon a reservoir that this Browns team, bereft of significant talent at most positions and constructed with a spinning

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carousal of players over the years, can't yet comprehend.

Where early Brady couldn't find seams, suddenly they were there and his vision improved. The Browns were playing soft and it yielded 6 yards, here, 9 yards there, another pass for 19 yards, another for 23. The clock was ticking, which is what the Browns wanted, but it came at the expense of the Patriots being inside the Cleveland 20 just a minute later. Then, with 1:09 remaining, one timeout and sitting on the Browns' 2 yard line, the Patriots did something odd. They tried to ram the ball into the end zone with running back Shane Vereen. It didn't work. It also forced the Patriots to use their last time out, which, too, seemed to be to the Browns' advantage.

The timeout gave the Patriots a chance to clear their heads. Afterward Brady hit receiver Julian Edelman in the back of the end zone. For good measure, the Browns' Jordan Poyer (who?) was penalized for unnecessary roughness, perhaps a questionable call, perhaps not. It was enforced on the kickoff which was most assuredly not to their advantage. It allowed the Patriots the chance to the onside kick that the Browns not only knew was coming but had plenty of time to scheme, from the 50 yard line, meaning that if successful it would give the Patriots even better field position.

And of course that's exactly how it worked out. Stephen Gostkowski drove the ball in the ground and ran in front of it, poised to pounce once it went the requisite 10 yards. The Patriots didn't need to wait that long. Fozzy Whitaker tried to field it after 9 yards only to see it bounce off his chest and into the arms of Kyle Arrington.

What happened next, at least in terms of the ultimate outcome, was entirely in the realm of the expected by fans of both teams. For New England, its fans have seen Brady do it for years. For Cleveland, its fans have seen every collapse imaginable.

As it happened Brady hit Danny Amendola for 10 yards because apparently defensive coordinator Ray Horton saw no reason to tighten the coverage, despite the Shermanesque march that was the last drive. Then Brady threw deep to Josh Boyce in the end zone. In one of the more questionable calls in a day of very poor officiating overall, defensive back Leon McFadden was called for pass interference. It gave the Patriots the ball at the 1 yard line. The Patriots were on the precipice of scoring having used barely 25 seconds. When Brady passed to Amendola for the go ahead touchdown, the collapse was complete.

Still, there were 31 seconds remaining and Jason Campbell and the Browns almost pulled it off. Campbell, who played brilliantly throughout, moved the team just outside of Cundiff's field goal range with 1 second remaining. On a day when a new NFL field goal record of 64 yards was set, Cundiff gave it his best effort, but his best wasn't good enough. On target but yards short, the game ended with the outcome that most expected anyway and the Browns further solidifying their hold on a good draft pick.

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In some sense it really was too bad. By now nearly everyone from your local barber to national sports pundit has weighed in on the interference call against McFadden with the strong consensus being that the call against McFadden was wrong. There was definite jostling in the end zone but far less, for example, than the mugging that Carolina did on Rob Gronkowski a few weeks back with no call. More accurately, had McFadden been called for holding prior to Boyce getting to the end zone few would have quibbled, mainly because it would have carried only a 5-yard penalty.

But let's acknowledge a few points. First, the penalty didn't cost the Browns the game. The Browns had several last clear chances to avoid the official's negligence. The defense could have stopped Brady on the prior drive. The return team could have cleanly fielded the onside kick. McFadden could have better covered Boyce and not let him get behind him. Inconvenient truths, I know, but truths just the same.

Second, those are exactly the calls that go against poor teams like the Browns and in favor of good teams like the Patriots. The NFL is not the NBA where superstars get a pass and rookies are hazed with ticky tack calls. But human nature is what it is and teams as consistently lousy as the Browns can't expect to get the benefit of the doubt. Factor in as well that McFadden was chasing Boyce and the Browns' secondary does have a fair number of interference calls against them this season so a call going against them is not justifiable necessarily but understandable or at least explainable.

You could also make the case that the Patriots didn't deserve the win. That's a much tougher case to make. The game lasts 60 minutes for a reason. Teams rarely play solid throughout. There will be peaks and valleys so while the Patriots spent most of the game walking the valleys, a team with that kind of talent will eventually find the trail to hike the peaks. The opposite tends to be the case with a team like the Browns. And when one team's peaks line up with another's valleys, well, the results tend to line up as you'd expect.

That was true early in the game when the Browns were building their lead while the Patriots were struggling and was just as true late when the Patriots found their magic and the Browns regressed to their norm.

It was in most other ways though a really solid effort by a Browns team that only a week before

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had been thoroughly embarrassed a week before by Jacksonville. It's the kind of performance that the team can build on if it wants to. It really is a choice.

Campbell, as mentioned, was brilliant. It may have been the best game of his career. He played with poise and was accurate throughout. On the day he was 29-44 for 391 yards and 3 touchdowns. He hit Josh Gordon in stride on a 10-yard slant that turned into an 80-yard touchdown and the 4-yard touchdown to Cameron was an exquisite rendering of deception in action. Gordon beautifully faked a handoff and by the time the Patriots recovered Cameron was wide open in the end zone for what appeared to be the backbreaking touchdown. This doesn't mean Campbell's presence has solved the Browns' quarterback problems. But if nothing else when the Browns do pounce on still another quarterback savior this offseason, Campbell should be kept anyway. He does have value.

Gordon was elite, again. Though the Patriots keyed on him early, Gordon still found his way to 7 catches and 151 yards. The aforementioned 80-yard touchdown was essentially a footrace that Gordon won by several lengths.

This is the 4th straight week Gordon has been well over 100 yards in receiving. In two of those weeks he was well over 200 yards. While much of the yardage he gained against Pittsburgh was late and the game long since lost, the other 3 weeks were far more critical. I mentioned this last week but it bears mentioning again. What makes Gordon's performances so eye-opening are the quarterbacks he's had throwing to him. Imagine if Gordon played for New England.

And yet, even with performing like Calvin Johnson and causing opposing defensive coordinators to scheme against him, the Browns still can't find a way to win. The one consolation for Gordon is that his agent will have plenty to talk about during contract negotiations.

Although this 4-9 version of the Browns doesn't look or play like those 4 and 5 win teams under Pat Shurmur and Eric Mangini and Romeo Crennel and Butch Davis, the results are nonetheless the same. Perhaps the Browns are building. Surely if they can hold on to Gordon and Cameron and find someone who can at least run for 60 or 70 yards a game, the offense will score consistently. And if the Browns can keep the defensive line mostly intact and build more depth in the defensive backfield, the defense won't collapse as much late.

Of course those old similarly situated Browns' teams had similar "if only" scenarios and they never seemed to follow through. Still you get the feeling that this ship won't sink completely to the bottom of the ocean. You'd just like to still be a fan by the time that proves to be the case.