



There is a point in every team's season, it doesn't matter the sport, doesn't matter if the athletes are paid, where it becomes clear that ultimate success will not be achieved. What separates good organizations from the bad is how their players respond in those circumstances.

In the NFL the Cleveland Browns have written most of the current chapters in the book on seasons played without consequence. Everyone following the team should be well used to that. Still, the seasons disappoint not just because of the results but because of what this franchise lacks institutionally. It isn't just a winning attitude. It's a sense of pride, a sense of purpose, a sense that its athletes share a common reason for getting out of the bed in the morning to try and accomplish something that may be beyond your physical talents.

Losing does beget losing and athletes are only human. But that still doesn't serve as any excuse for the way this Browns team went about losing against the Jets on Sunday, 24-13. It laid bare to whatever New York audience cared to watch that this franchise lacks any sense of pride. The team played without a sense of urgency, passion or pride. It was mentally already in

the offseason. Head coach Rob Chudzinski may have shown the appropriate anger afterward, but the vastness of the charge that lays before him in instilling a larger sense of purpose in this group must seem nearly insurmountable. It has proven that way for everyone that's come before him.

The Browns had a chance Sunday to win for the first time since early November as they entered the fourth quarter. Then again, that's a sentence that could have been written for each game in the last month. And like each game in the last month the Browns did what the Browns do. When a play needed to be made, on offense or defense, those being well compensated to do just that instead barely went through the motions. In the end, the defense collapsed and the team lost.

The Browns do all the big and little things it takes to be a bad team, so you have them that. If there's a 3rd and 7 to face, an indifferent linebacker looking to avoid contact and injury will lose the slot receiver over the middle and give up a completion for 8 yards. If 2 yards are needed for a first down, the offensive will get one. If the offense is first and goal a lineman will commit a false start. Wide open receivers will drop balls in the end zone. Play calls will get botched. Time outs will get taken at the wrong time. There's almost no aspect of the game that this Browns team can execute.

It really does come down to a lack of pride. What others franchises build around, the Browns treat like a staph infection to be avoided. It's not that the players quit on Chudzinski. It's worse. They quit on themselves.

Consider just this little stat: Four times the offense was in the red zone on Sunday and only once did it come away with a touchdown. One time it came away with nothing. The other two were chip shot field goals because, well, it simply isn't good enough and doesn't care enough to do anything more.

It's not as if the Jets were a model of efficiency, either. In the first half alone they tried two gimmick plays that were laughable in their ineptness. One was a fake punt that involved an underthrown pass to a receiver who fell down without anyone around. Another was a wildcat-based end around that lost 11 yards. But awful, like water, find its level and on the pecking order of awfulness the Browns deliberately don't care how low they can sink. When a team is this bad and has such little integrity in terms of how it goes about its business of performing for its fans it's like knocking bowling pins down in an alley where the gutters have cushions to find the telling examples. Almost every critical play on Sunday served as its own specific microcosm of the season, of the last 10 + seasons.

Consider first the series that followed the Jets' goofy and unsuccessful fake punt. The Browns had the ball on the Jets 43 yard line. The offense then ran off 13 plays and still only covered 34

yards. True, they were victimized by Greg Little dropping the ball after being wide open for what would have been a touchdown, but that's what Greg Little does. He hasn't caught a meaningful pass all season. He could be the poster child for the "mail it in" attitude that permeates this team. The 15th game is no time for him to find religion. Look at the bigger picture. The offense ran 13 plays and only got to the Jets 9 yard line before Billy Cundiff's field goal gave the Browns a 3-0 lead. I doubt you could find a longer series in the league this season by any team, including the Browns, that went for less yards and didn't involve a turnover. It's almost an impossible accomplishment.

Consider next the series where the Browns were parked on the Jets' two yard line and used 4 plays to gain zero yards. (The official play by play suggests the Browns' gained a yard. The official scorer was being generous.) That phantom one yard came on a first down run. The next three plays featured ill-conceived passes and no points Chudinski can't be faulted for using all four downs. He can be faulted for not overruling offensive coordinator Norv Turner's play calls. That series doesn't illustrate the ineptitude enough? Then how about with the Browns trailing by 7 midway through the fourth quarter and in the midst of moving the ball on the ensuing drive? It was at that very moment when pride can push a team through. Not this team. It has none. On first and goal from the 6 yard line, Edwin Baker gained four yards to, you guessed it, the Jets 2-yard line. On second down, some tight end no one's ever heard of and I'm going to keep it that way (Ok, Gary Barnidge) false started, pushing the ball back to the 7 yard line. One terrible pass by Jason Campbell and one dump off pass to get the ball back to the 2 yard line forced the Browns to settle for the chip shot field goal. And if that doesn't do it, then the fully expected, completely inevitable defensive collapse on the very next drive should do it. Again, it was a test of pride and again the lack of same was on display. On their way to the touchdown that would officially put the game out of reach, the Jets converted four third downs. That final conversion was a 17 yard scramble for God's sake by Geno Smith, the second worst quarterback in the league. (If you have to ponder for a moment who the worst quarterback in the league is, then stop reading now. Just stop. You live in a bubble that doesn't receive whatever broadcast signal shows Browns games on a weekly basis.)

The final measure, though, was the late garbage time interception Campbell threw to Ed Reed. It had no impact on the game. It had more of a historical flavor if only to demonstrate that nothing changes even as everything does. Reed could be wheeled out on a gurney 10 years from now against whichever of the next 21 quarterbacks the Browns will cycle through over the next 10 years and still get an interception against this team. In terms of what else happened in the game, ask yourself whether or not it really matters and then tell yourself it doesn't because it doesn't. Campbell was the epitome of his 9 year journeyman career. Some good plays, lots of bad plays and the overall inability to lead a team that desperately is in search of anyone to lead them anywhere.

While nothing that happened in the game qualified as a surprise, the question Chudzinski needs to ask defensive coordinator Ray Horton is how, exactly, has he gone about preparing his charges. Horton bragged a month ago about how well his defense was playing, results notwithstanding. He had a pile of statistics to prove his point. As Jim Bouton once said, "tell your statistics to shut up."

Horton's defense has done little the last several weeks to justify his misplaced braggadocio.. You could pick nits about a secondary without Joe Haden but it's not like the defense was playing well with him. Besides, the secondary has always been the weak link of the defense. That was true in week one and is just as true in week 15. Bad players don't get good just by playing more and no team can be armed with Buster Skrine and Leon McFadden and expect to stop anyone, including Dave Nelson, a receiver who wasn't even good enough to make the Browns' pitiful team.

The real issue against the Jets, as it was against the Bears a week before, was the incredibly lousy play of the defensive line. Forget about the healthy chunks of yardage they were giving up on the run against very average Jets' backs. Focus instead on the complete lack of pressure they got on Smith. He wasn't sacked once. To give you an idea of how embarrassing that is, Smith has been sacked 47 times this season, or more than 3 times per game. In fact, it's hard to find an offensive passing statistic that Smith isn't last or close to last in the league.

Going into Sunday's game Smith had the worst completion percentage, the fewest touchdown passes, the second most interceptions, the worst interception percentage per pass thrown, the worst adjusted passing yards per attempt (which takes into account interceptions) and the worst quarterback rating in the league. (Maybe he is the worst quarterback in the league. Memo to self: email Mike Lombardi and see if the Jets want to trade for Brandon Weeden.) But on this particular Sunday the Browns treated Smith like he was Peyton Manning. Unable or unwilling to apply any pressure, even a hack like Smith can play as he did in college. He completed 20 of 36 passes, had two touchdowns and gave up no interceptions.

Horton should be embarrassed and probably is. The defense should be embarrassed but probably isn't. There have been some low points for this franchise over the years making it very hard to discern between the dozens upon dozens of putrid performances. But the effort against Tampa Bay a few weeks ago and Sunday's effort against the Jets were something special all together. Teams with pride have awful games. Teams without pride have awful existences.

There's one final game of the season and it is the annual last game beat down against the Pittsburgh Steelers. Neither team will be playing for anything but that won't stop the Steelers from pushing the Browns around, just because they can. The Steelers are still a proud franchise. The Browns are a franchise that couldn't spell proud if you spotted them the p, r, and u. As they know, as we all know, you need a an "o" and a "d" and this team doesn't have either one.