

The First Impression

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, August 19 2007 7:00 PM -

Bernie said it best during the telecast, in the moments leading up to Brady Quinn's entry into Saturday night's game. You never get a second chance to make a first impression. And did he ever. Add in abysmal performances from Charlie Frye and Derek Anderson, and a surprising effort from Ken Dorsey ... and the landscape of the quarterback battle has changed dramatically overnight. Gary Benz opines.



Quibble about the circumstances if you must, but give the kid his due, he makes a heck of an entrance.

On a night that featured its share of ironic moments including the release of former franchise savior Tim Couch earlier in the day by the Jacksonville Jaguars, future franchise savior Browns quarterback Brady Quinn did something Saturday night that neither fellow quarterbacks Charlie Frye nor Derek Anderson have been able to accomplish: seize the moment. When former Browns quarterback Bernie Kosar, providing color commentary, uttered what even he called an overused cliché—"you never get a second chance to make a first impression"—it all seemed set up for such failure. Would Quinn stand behind the right tackle instead of the center on his first snap? Would he forget the play and call time out? Would he pull back from center too quickly and fumble the snap?

But for once, just once, it all went right. The first impressions in this case will be forever etched. Quinn dropped back for a short, confidence-building dump-off to last week's hero, Chris Barclay, who proceeded merely to scamper 30 yards. Virtually everything thereafter continued to go well for Quinn as he drove the Browns down and then did something neither Frye nor Anderson have been able to accomplish to this point in the preseason—punch the ball in for a touchdown.

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The contrast between Quinn's first appearance and Anderson's start could not have been more stark. Ever since Anderson appeared late last season as a viable contender to the starting role, Head Coach Romeo Crennel and a win-starved fan base have been craving for either Frye or Anderson to step forward and take the reins. But to this point it just hasn't happened. For every step forward, there are two steps back. On the first Browns play from scrimmage it was Anderson who looked every bit the scared rookie as he dropped back to pass and in his carelessness, had the ball stripped, leading to a relatively easy Detroit Lions field goal.

Anderson regrouped enough to make it clear that his future, at best, is in a back-up role, whether in Cleveland or elsewhere. Leading the team on its next drive and standing on the precipice of the first touchdown of the preseason, the Browns under Anderson suddenly crumbled into the mess of a team it was so much of last year. By the time the offensive linemen were finished false starting and Anderson was finished either ignoring the time clock or burning enough time outs to make sure he didn't blow the opportunity, he then did just that, failing to recognize that there was confusion in the middle of the field as Kellen Winslow, Jr. and Steve Heiden seemed to be running the exact same route, unfortunately in the exact same spot. Instead of throwing it away, he tried to force the issue with an ill-conceived pass late over the middle for the inevitable interception. It would be hard to script two worse possessions for Anderson personally or two more telling possessions, from the coaches' perspective assuming the question being asked of them is whether Anderson is the answer. He's not.

Frye, was, well, Frye. He completed his share of passes, as usual. And he made his share of mental mistakes, as usual. The fourth-and-2 play from the 35-yard line was the most instructive. It was a situation in which a team does one of two things. It either tries the old "see-if-we-can-pull-the-other-team-off-sides-with-a-hard-count" which worked once about 38 years ago, or a quick quarterback sneak which requires the element of surprise. Generally, teams expect the former, which is why, if you want to pull off the latter, you need to get the team set in a way that looks like instead you're just trying to pull the other team offside. Frye, showing all the composure of a high school boy on prom night, had the ball snapped before even half the team was set. The inevitable penalty would have been fine had Frye gained the two yards.

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Unfortunately, he failed in that, too, and 20 seconds later Detroit had finished off a four-play 66-yard drive for their first touchdown of the night.

While not as obviously abysmal as Anderson, Frye nonetheless showed that pedigree does matter and his years with the Akron Zips taught him little about taking over a room. Whether it's the pressure of the competition that is wearing on him or a talent level that is insufficient really doesn't matter. What is becoming clear is that for all his heart and grit, Frye is less Drew Brees and more Ty Detmer.

In evaluating Quinn, the post game comments of Crennel were as predictable as the befuddled looks he shows on the sidelines every time something bad happens on the offensive side of the ball. Crennel made sure everyone put Quinn's performance in perspective. It was late. It was against (and with) players who won't be playing pro football in a few weeks and the playbook was understandably limited. All true, of course. But what couldn't be hidden was the poise Quinn showed during that final two-minute drive. It was textbook in every facet. It started at the Browns 8-yard line with no timeouts remaining. One minute, 52 seconds later, the 13th play of the drive, Quinn threw a six-yard pass to Jerome Harrison for a touchdown. In between, Quinn made all the right reads, all the right moves and left everyone scratching their head trying to remember the last time they saw that happen.

It's both easy and proper to keep the night in perspective, as Crennel cautioned. But if you don't think that Quinn's performance made a deep impression on Frye, for example, just watch a replay of what happened following the end of the game. As Quinn was accepting congratulations from teammates and several Lions players as well, Frye was walking around, baseball cap backward, with an expression that that seemed to say, to paraphrase Jon Landau, "I saw Cleveland quarterbacking future and its name is Brady Quinn."

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This doesn't mean, of course, that Quinn should be the anointed starter. There is still much work to do. The performance of Quinn and, to a lesser extent, Ken Dorsey, who came on in the third quarter and led the Browns to their first touchdown of the preseason, were surely not enough to cause GM Phil Savage to dump either Frye or Anderson. At least not yet. But if, as conventional wisdom holds, the third preseason game is the most important of the four, then both Quinn and Dorsey deserve the bulk of the primetime reps. The books on Frye and Anderson and, perhaps even Dorsey, may not be complete, but there are certainly enough chapters written in each at this point for most to have a pretty good idea how the stories come out. Maybe there is a surprise or two still left, but the question facing Savage and Crennel is how much more time they want to invest finding out. And as they ponder that question, hopefully they'll come to the conclusion that no one ever got rich investing in the past.