

Baby Steps

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, October 13 2007 7:00 PM -

It may be that you get better by playing better teams. But if you want to know if you are better, play someone inferior. That's exactly how it set up for the Browns on Sunday and based purely on the final score, the Browns clearly are getting better, beating as they should have a bad Miami Dolphins team, 41-31. Gary Benz checks into his regular Sunday night time slot with his analysis piece on today's win.



It may be that you get better by playing better teams. But if you want to know if you are better, play someone inferior. That's exactly how it set up for the Browns on Sunday and based purely on the final score, the Browns clearly are getting better, beating as they should have a bad Miami Dolphins team, 41-31.

Showing the capacity to learn from the mistakes they made in Oakland earlier in the season, the Browns appeared prepared, if only because they didn't take the Dolphins too lightly. Aided greatly by a Dolphins personal foul on the opening kickoff, the Browns found themselves up 7-0 five plays and 2:14 into the game following Jason Wright's bull rush into the end zone and to the stomach of the umpire, Undray Wash. That cost Wash the rest of the game. The Dolphins weren't so lucky.

Despite making a game of it entering the third quarter, the Dolphins demonstrated exactly why they are winless. Too many mistakes and too little talent won't get you very far in the NFL. Just ask the Browns. Until this season

Baby Steps

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, October 13 2007 7:00 PM -

it's been their m.o.

The Browns, in winning a game it should have, kept their focus and minimized their mistakes, at least offensively, for much of the game. And as the game got close, they moved the ball and scored points at just the right moments to thwart any momentum the Dolphins were able to generate when they had the ball.

Indeed, looking back the story of this game is that the Browns do have a legitimate offense that will allow them to compete with any team in the league. The defense? A different matter altogether.

A victory over the Dolphins is never going to be nearly as satisfying as a victory over the Steelers or the Ravens. But at this point in their existence, neither the Browns nor their fans can afford to quibble.

Quarterback Derek Anderson, who has made amazing progress since nearly being cut at the end of training camp, had his best day as a professional. He was a very efficient 18-25 for 245 yards and three touchdowns. He also rushed for another. As importantly, he committed no turnovers. In fact, he didn't even come close to throwing an interception.

Receiver Braylon Edwards, who prior to this season was known more for his mouth and surly attitude than his actual performance, is making the thousands who have bought and publicly wear his jersey to the game look like geniuses. He tied the Browns franchise record for most touchdown catches in a game, three. As importantly, his presence now commands sufficient attention from the defense that the field has become much more open for players like Joe Jurevicius and Kellen Winslow II.

Baby Steps

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, October 13 2007 7:00 PM -

While the Anderson to Edwards combination has turned potent, the offense is more than a one-trick pony under coordinator Rob Chudzinski. Despite the absence of running back Jamal Lewis, Chudzinski didn't abandon the run, relying instead on Jason Wright and the seldom used Jerome Harrison to carry the load. And the two responded, leading the Browns to 140 yards on the ground, split nearly evenly between the two.

The ability to control the ball on the ground ultimately allowed the Browns to ice the game late, even as they were otherwise making puzzling choices, like the squib/on-side kick after going up by 17 with 4:34 left in the game. It may be that the Browns were nervous about kicking again to the Dolphins' Ted Ginn, Jr., whose run back for a touchdown at the start of the third quarter was nullified by a holding call. But given another woeful performance by the defense, taking a chance on a long run back would have been a more reasonable risk than giving the Dolphins a short field.

This Browns offense may not be the football equivalent of the Cleveland Indians in the mid '90s, but like those teams they have enough weapons to go toe-to-toe with the opposition and simply out slug them for a victory. It's something, frankly, they'll need to in order to win given the overall lack of progress by the defense.

Cleo Lemon, a fourth-year player out of Arkansas State, was making his first NFL start—ever. But apparently not much about the Browns defense rattled Lemon as he completed 24 of 43 passes for 256 yards and two touchdowns. He also ran for two more. That's four touchdowns plus a field goal to a team averaging only 19.4 points per game.

Maybe the Browns' defense instead was more focused on stopping running back Ronnie Brown. If so, that didn't much work either. He went over the 100-yard mark for the fourth straight week and had nine catches for 69 yards. In fact, if not for the vastly improved offense of the Browns, coupled with a Dolphins defense that is every bit as woeful as Cleveland's, the Browns may very have

Baby Steps

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, October 13 2007 7:00 PM -

found themselves on the wrong end of this game.

But as it stands, the Browns do find themselves at 3-3. For perspective, this is the most victories the Browns have had this late in the season since 2003. Of course, that didn't end so well for the Browns as they won only two more the rest of the way. Thus the better measure may be the 2001 season when they had their "new" Browns peak after six games, 4-2, again under Davis. That was a season where they went 7-9 and parlayed that the following season into the playoffs before imploding under the great salary cap purge that ultimately resulted in Davis' panic attacks and the Romeo Crennel years.

The Browns' .500 mark entering the bye week is as unanticipated as nearly anything when the 2007 schedule was announced. Running a close second is the 3-1 home record. Though not at the season's halfway point, the remaining 10 games now provide a mixed bag of opportunities for the Browns to demonstrate that they are no longer a league doormat.

But before that happens, they simply have to find a way to improve on defense. Whether it is a rash of new players, new schemes or a combination of the two, something has to change or a team with a decent chance to finish 8-8 will end up with, at best, six wins. The difference may not seem like much but it is significant in this league. It's the difference between ending the season with momentum for the next and ending the season knowing that a full third of the team needs an extreme makeover before the playoffs are realistic. Knowing how long it's taken the Browns offense to look this good demonstrates that such makeovers are not a one-year task.

The other drama that's really starting to take hold with this team is at quarterback. Given Anderson's shaky performance during the pre-season, the Browns' best case scenario seemed to be that Anderson would hopefully play well enough to keep quarterback-in-waiting, Brady Quinn, on the sidelines until at least the break. As it stands now, barring an injury, Quinn isn't likely to see much action except in mop-up for the rest of the season.

Baby Steps

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, October 13 2007 7:00 PM -

Anderson's play, even more than that of Edwards, has been the most pleasant development in this franchise in years. He has 14 touchdown passes after six games and is on pace to break Brian Sipe's franchise mark of 30 for a season. After Sunday's performance, his quarterback rating will put him in the top half of the entire league. More importantly, he continues to show the kind of progress that makes one wonder what this coaching staff ever saw in Charlie Frye in the first place. There is a real chance that the Browns may very well find themselves in the same position as the San Diego Chargers did a few years ago with Drew Brees and Phillip Rivers—two able quarterbacks and only one ball.

It's a good problem to have, of course, but a problem nonetheless. Fortunately, solving it ranks low on the priority scale. On this day and at this break, this franchise should feel good about the baby steps forward it has taken, but only if, at the same time, it understands that the real key to success is not offense, it's defense.