

Heroes & Zeroes: Week 8

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Thursday, November 01 2007 7:00 PM -

Romeo a hero this week? Derek Anderson having the best year of any NFL quarterback not named Brady? The Browns on pace to break the franchise record for points scored? The Browns in the playoff hunt? What in the sam hell is going on here?!? It's "Heroes & Zeroes" time again here at TCF, and as he does each week, Nick Allburn gives us the five stars and the five goats from last weeks Browns game. Seahawks. Sunday. Let's keep it rollin' Browns!



It wasn't always pretty, but the Browns notched their first road victory against a Rams team that, although winless, was a dangerous match up in the Edward Jones Dome. This was a game the Browns had to have in order to stay in the postseason conversation.

It's rare to play a winless team this late in the season, and on the road with the Rams returning some key players off of the injured list, it was the perfect trap game.

In the early going, an upset looked possible, as the Rams sprinted to a 14-0 lead in the first quarter. Older Browns teams would have caved, but not these Browns. From that point on, the Browns were dominant, outscoring the Rams 27-6 in the final 50 minutes.

This Week's Heroes

Five Dog Bones: Romeo Crennel

A very legitimate criticism of Crennel is that he's often too stoic. Every now and then, football players need to have their cages rattled a little, and the charge often falls to the head coach to fire them up.

After yielding two consecutive touchdowns, the Browns' defense were in need of a wakeup call. The smart money **wasn't** on Crennel to pump up the troops.

It was more surprising than learning that Vader was Luke's father (*"t;THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!"*), but Romeo Crennel sat his defense down and promptly got up in their grilles. And wouldn't you know it, they responded, holding the Rams to six points over the last three-plus quarters of the game.

I'm still far from sold on Crennel, but I'd love to be wrong about him, and I happily give him credit for pushing the right buttons this week.

Four Dog Bones: Derek Anderson

Playing well in consecutive games? Check. A win on the road? Check.

DA made more progress on Sunday, and his development continues to be as rapid as it is surprising. Assuming that Brady Quinn's preseason success wasn't an outright façade, the Browns might find themselves

with two capable quarterbacks this off season. And like having too much quality pitching in baseball, it's a problem that teams love to have.

Anderson has now played two turnover-free, relatively mistake-free games in a row, and his numbers, which are almost wholly similar, reflect that. Against both Miami and St. Louis, Anderson was 18 of 25, for almost 250 yards (245, 248, respectively), with three touchdowns. Temper your enthusiasm somewhat because both opponents are still posting donuts in the win column, but it looks like Anderson is starting to find some consistency.

Like the Browns as a whole, we're going to learn volumes about Anderson's legitimacy over the next three games, which mark the most difficult remaining stretch on the schedule. Seattle, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore all have solid defenses. Mr. Anderson, the ball is in your court.

Three Dog Bones: Rob Chudzinski

With the quarterback change and the revamped offensive line, it's easy to overlook Chudzinski's masterful play calling. Nothing makes you appreciate great play calling better than having Maurice Carthon calling the shots for a year and a half.

Chud has made adjustments all year long and he's tailored the offensive scheme to fit the Browns' personnel. Imagine that.

In the preseason, most thought that this would be a run-first offense. However, the passing attack has completely surpassed the running game, and Chudzinski has adjusted accordingly. On Sunday, Chudzinski used the pass to set up the run, and it worked.

Following the 2005 campaign, the Browns signed a 6' 4" physical, veteran receiver named Joe Jurevicius. He wears number 84. We didn't see him much last year. Apparently Chud noticed that this guy can catch the football, and for the first time in over a year, the Browns are finally taking advantage of Jurevicius' skill set.

Do you remember those short passes that Anderson struggled with in the past? Such passes have been strangely absent in the last few games. More adjustments.

Chudzinski's name is already being mentioned as a "hot" candidate for a head coaching position, and rightfully so. The guy's obviously pretty sharp. For the Browns' sake, let's hope Chud sticks around for at least one more season.

Two Dog Bones: The Offensive Line

The Rams sacked Derek Anderson twice. The fact that two sacks raises eyebrows these days exemplifies the line's growth.

The Browns spent money and a high draft choice on the offensive line last off season. There haven't been any injuries on the line this year. Consequently, the line has played well. It's not rocket science.

Supposedly the reports of a LeCharles Bentley comeback in '07 have been greatly exaggerated. *No kidding.* It was incredibly unrealistic to expect Bentley back this season, and it would probably be irresponsible to bring him back so quickly.

That said, Bentley's progress will be an interesting storyline over the next few months, and his potential return is a wild card for the '08 Browns. Can Bentley even make a recovery? If so, can he come close to his former level of play? We'll know in time.

One Dog Bone: Steven Jackson

Dallas must absolutely rue the day they traded down to pick Julius Jones instead of Steven Jackson.

Jackson is an absolute beast, and he was carving up the Browns' defense like.....well, like most running backs have this year. The Rams looked rejuvenated by his return. But it didn't make much sense to rush him back right before the Rams' bye week, and they paid the price.

A bulging disc in Jackson's back began to act up, and when coupled

with an injury to Richie Incognito, the Rams lost their best player and their coolest name, effectively putting the kibosh on their momentum.

Jackson was averaging over five yards per carry before leaving the game. Jackson's replacement, Brian Leonard, managed only 2.2 YPC.

Thanks, S-JAX, we couldn't have done it with(out) you.

This Week's Zeroes

Five Demerits: The Defensive Line

This position needs a makeover as much (if not more) than their counterparts on offense have in recent years. With this group, trying to find positives to highlight is like trying to watch *Caddyshack* without laughing; it's freaking impossible.

Next year's squad is going to need at least a pair of new starters, and that's bad news for a team without a first round pick.

With cap flexibility in the foreseeable future, Phil Savage could always go the free agent route and throw cash at the problem. Unfortunately, good 3-4 linemen usually don't make it to free agency because they're simply too rare and valuable for teams to allow them to walk. It's time for everyone to start praying nightly that Albert Haynesworth hits the

market this winter.

Four Demerits: Leigh Bodden

Isn't this guy supposed to be good?

Bodden has been arguably the Browns' best defender in recent years. I'm not sure if it's nagging injuries, family issues, or an irrational fear of avian flu, but LB has been very ordinary this season.

Maybe it's due to something opponents have noticed on film, but Bodden is getting turned around far too often. It's as if he's expecting a hitch route and the receiver runs a fly pattern.

Whether it's leaving a cushion, or chucking the receiver near the line, Bodden needs to regain his old form, because he's making Eric Wright look like the veteran corner.

The good news on Bodden is that he's still creating turnovers. Bodden has four interceptions on the year, and he made one hell of a snag to finish off the Rams.

Three Demerits: Jamal Lewis

Lewis hasn't been a bust, but the overwhelming perception among the fan base is that he's done a great job so far, which is far from the truth.

Lewis' fragile right foot kept him out of the Miami game, and he only lasted one play against the Patriots. Nagging injuries have been a grim reality for Lewis the last several years, and a new team apparently hasn't changed that.

Yes, Lewis is averaging 4.7 yards per carry, but that impressive average was primarily built in one big game against the Bengals. Here are Lewis' yards per carry, game-by-game (minus the New England game when he only carried the ball once), 3.2, 8.0, 3.7, 2.8 and 3.6. Take the 8.0 YPC from the Cincinnati out of the equation, and Lewis has been very mediocre.

This isn't as much meant to rip on Lewis' performance against the Rams (17 carries, 61 yards) as it is a critique in the big picture. The offense doesn't lose anything with Jason Wright starting and Jerome Harrison spelling him. Lewis is a still valuable, if overrated part of the team.

This off season, Lewis will seek a multi-year deal with significant guaranteed dollars, and the Browns would be wise to pass on him. Lewis will be 29 next year, which is about 75 in running back years. The Browns' line is now good enough for anyone to run behind, so they can retain Wright and Harrison, and possibly bring in a free agent or a mid/late round draft pick to fill out the roster.

The important thing is that Phil Savage doesn't make the mistake of overpaying for a running back that's over the hill. The Browns need young talent at running back, not injury prone has-beens.

Two Demerits: Todd Grantham

I remember writing two years ago that Todd Grantham was garnering consideration as a head coaching candidate. Nowadays? No dice, Todd.

It's frustrating that the defense, which seemed to overachieve the last two years, has taken a significant step backwards this season. Agent Orange must absorb some of that blame.

It certainly isn't all Grantham's fault, the Browns have significant personnel holes on defense, particularly at defensive line and linebacker. Even so, there's no excuse for being ranked dead last in total defense, allowing over 410 yards per game. The Browns might not be loaded on defense, but they have a handful of quality players.

Conventional wisdom says that the Browns can't simply try to outscore their opponents each week and expect to win. Eventually, the defense will need to step up. Hopefully, Grantham can devise some creative schemes to help his defense reach at least a mediocre level of performance.

One Demerit: Braylon Edwards

It's tough to rip a guy who dominated the opposition with what was probably his best game as a pro. Unfortunately, Edwards made two big mistakes that could have cost the Browns the game.

Number one, the much-maligned 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty that Braylon was hit with near the end of the third quarter. Apparently Edwards thought it was the end of the quarter, but regardless, you just can't do stuff like that in the NFL.

The Browns still got a field goal out of the deal, but without that 15-yard penalty, they may have scored a touchdown.

Edwards is a guy with a reputation as a hothead, and refs are generally biased against those guys. Kellen Winslow was penalized several times last year for the kind of petty jawing and "taunting" that plenty of other players (i.e. Joey Porter, the entire Baltimore defense) get away with. For Braylon, it's simple: don't give the officials an excuse to slap you with a dumb penalty.

Mistake number two: the patented Braylon Edwards drop of a perfect pass. Derek Anderson should never hit Edwards on the hands because it's his Achilles' heel.

On the Browns' last possession with time winding down, Edwards was wide open on third down with a chance to put the game away.

Anderson's pass hit Edwards perfectly in stride, and Edwards did his best Travis Wilson impression. The Rams shouldn't have had their last chance drive, and they wouldn't have if Braylon had squeezed that last pass.

Overall, a great performance by Edwards, with a couple stupid mistakes that he can easily rectify. It's scary to think that Edwards still has room for improvement, especially considering that minus Randy Moss, Edwards is hands down the best receiver in the in the league this season.

Standings

Dog Bones

Offensive Line---20

Braylon Edwards---13

Derek Anderson---10

Romeo Crennel---8

Joshua Cribbs---7(t)

Kellen Winslow---7(t)

Demerits

Romeo Crennel---13

Defensive Line---12

Derek Anderson---9

Andrea Davis---8

Rich Gannon---7

Bradywatch

The Browns are in contention, and Derek Anderson is playing well. It looks like Brady could be relegated to the bench all season long. Thus, the "Bradywatch" segment will be discontinued until there is actually a reason to be watching Brady.

Up Next: 10/4, Seattle Seahawks, Cleveland Browns Stadium, 4:15

This is a huge game. The next three games represent the toughest stretch remaining on the Browns' schedule, and they really need to win two out of three to have a good shot at the playoffs. At the same time, they better make damn sure they win at least one of three. They have a chance to start off on the right foot against the Seahawks on Sunday.

I like the Browns' chances at home. The Seahawks aren't the running juggernaut they once were, and they're much tougher at home, inside crazy-loud Qwest Field. Matt Hasselbeck will have success against the Browns' secondary, so hopefully the Browns can contain Seattle's passing attack, if not completely stop it.

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The good news is that if Hasselbeck torches the Browns, fans can start up the old "CHARLIE! CHARLIE!" chants. Hopefully Holmgren takes the bait. *Sucker.*

The Browns can score on just about anybody, but it would be nice to see them try to control the clock a little bit against a slightly undersized Seattle defense. Heavy doses of Jamal Lewis and Jason Wright seem appropriate against a defense that can have trouble stuffing the run.

I can see any number of things happening in this game, the only scenario that seems unlikely is a Seattle blowout.

My Call: Browns 30, Seahawks 20