

Through The Looking Glass

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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In Gary's latest, he says that as good as another Browns win feels, the reality that comes with the dawning of Monday is that the Browns are headed to Pittsburgh on Sunday. With the remaining schedule seemingly favorable, the Browns don't necessarily have to win the game to prove they are legitimate playoff contenders, but it would help. The Browns have plenty of demons to exorcise in the Steeler rivalry, and going into Heinz Field and competing would be yet another big morale boost to this football team.



Before the Browns season started, most fans were already looking toward November, not because of some key intra-division match-up but because that's when the Cavs season opened. Undoubtedly, it held more promise.

But here we are, entering the second week of November, the Cavs are on the west coast and flying below the radar while fans are indeed focused on a key Browns intra-division match-up. This is what it's like to live on the other side of the looking glass.

When the Browns entered the Stadium this past Sunday to take on their lookalike cousin from the West Coast, the Seattle Seahawks, the prevailing thought was that since the two teams were so similar offensively, the dividing line would be the defense. Uh oh.

And indeed it looked that way early when Seattle took a 21-9 lead at halftime. But in what is most surely becoming the most inexplicable season experienced by any Cleveland pro sports team in recent memory, somehow the Browns ended up on the winning side of the ledger, again, winning a third straight game for the first

time in six years.

The hows and wherefores were on full display Sunday. The problem is figuring out what really was the key. Talk to a hundred people and you'll get a hundred different views.

Some might think, for example, that Jamal Lewis doing his best Jerome Bettis impersonation as one of the keys, even if the comparison is a bit imperfect. Sure, Lewis had a very Bettis-like performance with four rushing touchdowns for a combined six yards. But unlike Bettis in his last few years, the Browns actually use Lewis as their regular back. That didn't help much on Sunday. Even when he wasn't scoring, he was still running for less than two yards a carry-16 other times for 31 yards. Still it would be hard to dismiss his hard-nose running in the red zone on Sunday or his key 34-yard run on a screen pass in overtime.

Some might discuss Derek Anderson, again, putting together yet another in a string of standout performances. He threw a career high 48 times, completing 29 for 364 yards but for no touchdowns, due mostly to some poor throws in the red zone. But his two naked bootlegs, particularly the second that came in overtime, were absolutely crucial to the outcome. As unexpected as the first call was, the second was even more so. It's like trying two fake punts in one game. Anderson's play has made for a level of intrigue at the quarterback position that will fully play out in the coming months, if not years.

Some would also feel it worth mentioning offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski, who has brought the Browns the most innovative offense this town has seen since the Lindy Infante days. Each week reveals still another wrinkle, like the aforementioned Anderson bootlegs. And with all Chudzinski has brought and for what the future appears to hold, he deserves a pass on some iffy play calling at the end of the first half on Sunday that resulted in a field goal when a touchdown seemed inevitable.

It would be hard to argue with those who claim that the game was won on the sheer will of tight end Kellen Winslow, II. His 11 catches for 125 yards hardly tell the whole story. It was a heroic performance of epic proportions. It wasn't Hacksaw Reynolds playing on a broken leg, but it was close. Going into the Seattle game Winslow already was nursing all manner of injuries, every one of which seemed to be aggravated at some point during the game. But he fought through it in a way that makes one appreciate how truly brutal the pro game can be and why whatever money the players make, sometimes it just isn't enough.

Winslow's past issues were enough to paint him as a bit of an iconoclast if not a total outsider with the rest of his teammates. But at this point, there is no question that he has become the heart and soul of this team. His play on Sunday is exactly what is meant by leading by example. There is absolutely no doubt that Winslow's fellow teammates watched that performance with a sense of both shock and awe and ultimately came away knowing that however hard they may be working individually, they'll have to work that much harder just to keep pace with him. Forget all the other mumbo jumbo you hear from coaches, this is how teams ultimately get made.

But I think I speak for many Browns fans here when I say that the major takeaway from this game and, to a certain extent the Rams game the week before, is that the best way to get this defense to perform is to put the other team in a fourth and one situation. Anything else and you're taking your chances.

Opposing teams toy with the Browns defense like an older brother toys with his little sister having a tea party with Barbie and Ken. Like plastic tea cups and plates, defensive coordinator Todd Grantham gets all the pieces of the Browns defense set up just so every week only to have the opposing team kick the table over time and again.

But for reasons that will remain as mysterious as the popularity of Dancing with the Stars, when it gets to fourth and one the Browns defense responds, two straight weeks. And while they are playing lousy defense in general this is the

one area they have mastered. Which means, of course, that from this point forward Grantham just needs to get his players to act like every down is fourth and one. It's worth a shot, anyway. Not much else is working.

What really is hard to fathom at this point is that the Browns came through the first half of the season, when the schedule was arguably the hardest, at 5-3. Equally hard to fathom is that they are 4-1 at home. What was the over and under for that at the beginning of the season and who had the guts to make that bet? Only the truly degenerate gamblers.

But of course, as good as another Browns win feels, the reality that comes with the dawning of Monday is that the Browns are headed to Pittsburgh on Sunday. With the remaining schedule seemingly favorable, the Browns don't necessarily have to win the game to prove they are legitimate playoff contenders, but it would help.

What would help even more, however, for this team's and this town's psyche is for the Browns not to lay a gigantic egg in the middle of Heinz Field, again. That goal may seem modest but it is an important bridge that has to be crossed. The drubbings this team has endured by the Steelers recently all have served to demoralize in a way that a few victories against teams like Miami and St. Louis can't erase. Even a "quality" win (whatever that means) against Seattle won't linger very long if the Browns get abused next Sunday.

The Browns started the season as a laughingstock. Since then they've gone from a curiosity to competitive to a full-fledged surprise. But if they are going to progress further, to, say, a quality team, there is not only the pesky business of acquiring better defensive players to contend with, there also is the pesky business of exorcising the remaining ghosts, like the Steelers.

Maybe that's putting unnecessary pressure on this team. But on the other hand, if this team is really playoff caliber, that's the least of the pressure they're likely to

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feel down the road. If the Browns really want to prove that they're back, next Sunday is as good a time as any.