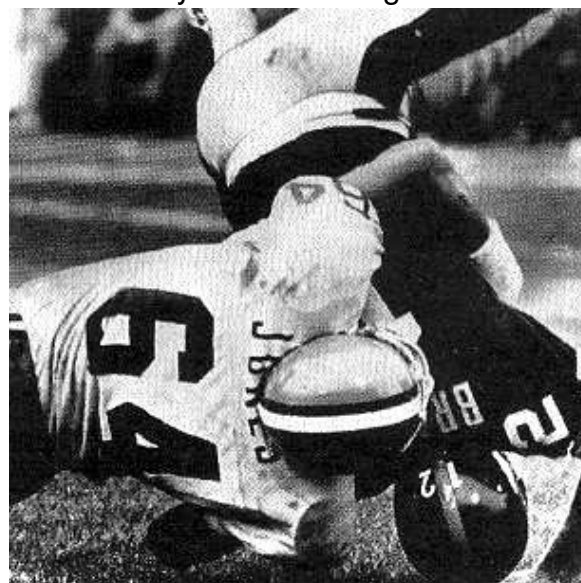


Rivalry Weeks

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, November 07 2007 7:00 PM -

One of the great allures in sports is rivalries. The chance to have your team assert their superiority against a detested foe. There are few sweeter moments as a sports fan. Browns/Steelers Sunday. Ohio State/Michigan next Saturday. And Browns/Ravens the day after that. Buckle up Cleveland fans, should be a fun couple of weeks. Gary hits on the big games coming up ... as well as rivalries in general in his latest.



One of the great allures of sports is rivalries. The chance to have your team assert its superiority, to impose its will against a team you detest for some reason, real or perceived, is what most separates sports from other leisurely pursuits, like stamp collecting.

Even though the Browns were going for their third straight victory this past weekend on their quest toward credibility, it's worth noting for example that there were more than a few fans nonetheless interested in the game that was on opposite: New England vs. Indianapolis and not simply because both teams were undefeated. It was because over the years those teams have developed into a recognized rivalry with a subtext of good vs. evil.

But whatever passing interest that game held locally, it pales in comparison to what faces fans in the next two weeks.

First up are the Steelers. Undoubtedly Browns fans were watching this past Monday night's Steelers-Ravens game with a vested interest, hoping at the very

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least that enough players from both teams would get hurt, not necessarily seriously but certainly to the extent that it would sideline them for a few more weeks.

In one sense, for Browns fans, a Steelers/Ravens game is like watching Iran play Syria. It's never a question of who to root for only who to root hardest against. But at some point during that game it occurred to me that even as Browns fans have been taught from birth to hate the Steelers, there was something peculiarly satisfying about watching the Ravens and head coach Brian Billick have their lunch handed to them, even at the hands of the Steelers, which is as hard to write as imagine. Maybe it has something to do with recent history between Cleveland and Pittsburgh.

For one, Joey Porter, the loudmouth face of the Steelers of the last few seasons, is gone, though it's nice to recount that he got his comeuppance when the Steelers tired of his act and he ended up signing with Miami. That's worked out pretty well for him. Still, Porter wasn't completely wrong when he noted after last December's beating that you can't have a rivalry if one team has no chance of winning.

True enough, but that inconvenient fact has only dulled the rivalry, it hasn't extinguished it. It can't.

Enough hatred of the Steelers has built up over the years that it's part of the local DNA, the product of an admixture of geography and jealousy that's ebbed and flowed in different directions over the years. Up until around 1972, the Browns owned the Steelers. But the opposite has basically been true from the mid '70s on and the emergence of the Steelers as a dominant franchise.

Don't forget, the Browns went nearly a generation (16 years) without winning in Three Rivers Stadium and when that boil was finally lanced in 1986, you would have thought that the Browns actually won the Super Bowl. Meanwhile, all the

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Steelers have done is actually won five Super Bowls.

Fortunately, though the rivalry has waned a bit, it eventually will return, likely with a vengeance. Still even a hard core Browns fan has to admit that when it comes to Pittsburgh, there really isn't as much to hate, at least not in the same way that one can hate the Ravens, a team the Browns play in two weeks.

Remember, the city of Baltimore stole the Browns, plain and simple. They had a lousy owner in Robert Irsay who yanked the Colts from a town that had lived and died with them at least as much as Cleveland did with the Browns.

But because Baltimore city leaders were either too dumb or too lazy to handle Irsay, they instead decided to transfer their misery onto another town, a city that had done nothing to Baltimore except celebrate when the Browns trounced the Colts 27-0 in the 1964 championship game. Kind of long to hold a grudge, don't you think?

Go figure that Baltimore's governor and mayor found a willing patsy in Art Modell, a destitute owner who couldn't be trusted running the finances of a medium-sized paper route, let alone a NFL franchise. He took the money, he had too. It's just desserts that he permanently destroyed his reputation in that bargain and then had to sell the team anyway when he blew the money Baltimore gave him. Gone. Never forgotten.

That will always make the Ravens enemy number one. Always. It matters little if it was sanctioned by the NFL or facilitated by Al Lerner in order to get ownership of the Browns. It matters little who the current caretaker of the franchise is. It matters little who the coach is, though Billick makes a good foil, so impressed is he with the enormousness of his own brain. The fact will always remain that the city stole the team and it will always be wrong. Between the Ravens and the Steelers, if you can only win one of those two games, it's no contest. Beat the Ravens every time.

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A little further down the road waits the Cincinnati Bengals. As heated as this rivalry should be, it's always lacked the pizzazz of Browns vs. Steelers, probably because it always seemed like more of a rivalry to Cincinnati than to Cleveland. Before Bill Belichick, there was Paul Brown. He wasn't necessarily as disengaging as Belichick nor was he necessarily the evil genius that Belichick has become. In fact, for many, many years Brown was one of us.

But cast aside by Modell (notice a theme here?), Brown regrouped in Cincinnati. And don't think that he wasn't as much fueled by hate and vengeance, against the Browns at least, as Belichick seems to be against the rest of the league these days. But despite the fact that this annual two-game series is billed as "The Battle of Ohio," the point is that if you have to give the official rivalry a name, it probably isn't much of one. Frankly, Browns fans never cared much for Modell either, in fact they cared more for Brown, so it wasn't always the worst thing to see Brown extract some revenge on Modell, even at the expense of the Browns.

It's always nice to beat the Bengals, but more so as a divisional game than anything else. This year beating the Bengals may be crucial to the Browns playoff hopes. But this rivalry, once at best a distant second to the Browns/Steelers, is now an even more distant third, at least unless and until Steve Bisciotti, the Ravens current owner, ups and moves the franchise to Los Angeles. We can only hope.

In fact, it may be a distant fourth if it exists at all. Well ahead of the Browns/Bengals game in the minds of most Cleveland fans anyway is the granddaddy rivalry of all time, Ohio State/Michigan. People who don't know the difference between football and foosball know that the Buckeyes and Wolverines are mortal enemies and will always be. It would be less shocking for Britney Spears to win the Nobel Prize for Physics than to see these two teams ever get along, which is what makes it the most fun rivalry at all. It's not too much of a stretch to say that most Buckeye fans would root for Al Qaeda if they were playing Michigan. The reverse is likely true as well, but that would require Michigan fans to know who Al Qaeda is, which is doubtful.

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The Browns/Steelers game this weekend is first up but is a mere prelude to the delicious pairing, on consecutive days, of Ohio State/Michigan and Browns/Ravens in two weeks. For a fan base like Cleveland's that runs hard on negativity, keeping enough rage in the tank for the next two weeks shouldn't be a problem. Containing it may be a completely different matter, altogether. It could get ugly. Hide the kids.