

Lingering Items

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, November 14 2007 7:00 PM -

Gary Benz just can't get last Sunday's loss to the Steelers out of his craw. Specifically the two timeouts the Browns lost on the challenge of the Heath Miller fourth quarter touchdown. Gary breaks down Romeo's explanation of the debacle, which he feels exposes a lack of institutional discipline within the team. Gary also hits on the slew of e-mails he received after his Sunday night post game column, many of which wanted to place the blame for the loss at the hands of the officials.



A few thoughts still kicking around following Sunday's game...

So now we know. It wasn't mere confusion that caused the Browns to blow two critical timeouts against the Steelers on Sunday, it was institutionalized mayhem. Feel better?

Anyone who listened to Romeo Crennel's post-mortem on Monday about the Steelers loss got an earful about what happened on the sidelines late in the fourth quarter on Sunday following Heath Miller's touchdown grab that put the Steelers up for good. Crennel was alternately earnest and testy, tolerating the questions initially and becoming increasingly agitated by them as they wore on. But when it was all said and done, anyone looking for a cogent explanation or at least an explanation that didn't reveal the shortcomings of the head coach was left to look elsewhere.

For those keeping track of these sorts of things, after the game Crennel said of the ill-fated replay challenge: "I'm not exactly sure what happened, but a timeout was called on the field and then I followed it up with a challenge, and so it

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ended up costing us two timeouts. What else can I tell you? So put it on me." Well, exactly, which is why the questions on Monday.

Piecing it together from the various answers on Monday, which is no small task, the first time out was called because a play may have misunderstood a hand signal from a coach on the sidelines and called for the first time out. This may make sense until you remember that timeouts can be called from the sideline so there would have been no need for a coach to signal one in. The better explanation here is that a player or a coach simply screwed up and Crennel doesn't want to throw him under the bus. Fair enough.

Focusing more on the replay itself, apparently Replay Consultant (interesting title) T. J. McCreight thought he saw something that looked like Miller dropping the ball and reported it to Crennel, who said he was otherwise distracted because he was talking with his kick return unit. Based on what McCreight was telling him, Crennel said he spoke with the officials, who apparently were trying to remind Crennel that he had already called a time out and thus was putting another one at risk. He told them "I'm going to challenge it anyway." According to Crennel, though he didn't have definitive information from McCreight on the issue, it was a crucial point in the game and it was worth taking a chance.

Undoubtedly it was a crucial point in the game and, generally speaking, taking that kind of chance makes sense, which was the reason to throw the red challenge flag immediately. But in context, after already having burned a time out for no good reason, risking another one upped the stakes to potentially unacceptable levels. That's the piece, unfortunately, that Crennel didn't seem to properly factor into his overall thinking.

Too often Crennel seems like he doesn't know quite what's taking place in front of him and that came back to hurt the Browns on Sunday. It didn't necessarily cost them the game, but it didn't help either. Crennel is 2-20 in replay challenges, including this season. Last season, when he was 0-7, he ranked at the bottom of the league. Admittedly, the overall success rate isn't all that great for any team

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and sometimes it depends on the officiating crew where it is common knowledge that certain referees get it wrong more often than others.

But Crennel's abject futility in having calls overturned isn't just an interesting little statistic, either. It speaks to a lack of institutional discipline and a continuing reliance on a coaching staff that time and again fails him in this regard. Crennel apparently cognizant of the team's shortcomings did replace last year's Replay Consultant (interesting title) but that hasn't worked so well either.

Crennel's right. This one's on him-to actually fix whatever process or lack thereof that's in place so that he isn't left guessing once again and getting it wrong. And while he's at it, he might want to get a better handle on his own lack of situational awareness and stop making decisions like this on the fly.

In the end, time and again it seems like the Browns are held back by the lack of fine detail work that distinguishes the good teams from the also-rans. It's not glamorous work, to be sure, and it doesn't always make a difference, except when it does. It certainly was a difference maker Sunday.

One of the more amusing sidelights to any lousy loss is the number of people who are quick to overlook the obvious while in search of the devious. I've received a number of emails essentially claiming, for various reasons, that the Browns didn't lose the game; it was stolen from them by the referees. As one emailer implored me: write the truth.

Think whatever you want about Sunday's game, but one thing is for certain, the Browns lost that game through a combination of offensive, defensive and coaching ineptness. When I think about a game being stolen, I think of the U.S. vs. Russia in Olympic basketball in 1972, not some middle of the season, generic

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NFL game, the outcome of which had only marginal meaning attached to it.

But if you're in the camp that the officiating cost the game, there's a few things you're going to need to ignore while you're ruminating over whether who was actually more guilty of holding, Darnell Dinkins on the Josh Cribbs punt return or a half of the Steelers line on the Ben Roethlisberger 30-yard touchdown run.

For starters, you're going to need to ignore Derek Anderson, so good for the first half of the season and even the first half of the Steelers game, suddenly looking like a career back-up and appearing rattled not by the blitz but by the coverages he was seeing from the Steelers secondary. You'll also probably need to ignore more broadly a Browns offense that couldn't muster a first down the entire second half until the last minute of the game. If you want to ignore more specifically, then take your pick: the aging Willie McGinest looking like he had been taking tackling lessons from Deion Sanders or an equally aging Jamal Lewis averaging two yards a carry for the second straight week.

Maybe it's easy to get past these pesky little items as you're connecting the threads of your latest conspiracy theory, but if you're going to focus on the mediocre performance of the officials, then you're obviously in the camp that sees Super Bowl in a squad that will be lucky to get to 8-8. You want the truth? You can't handle the truth.

Speaking of the truth, but in a more positive sense, the surest sign that the Browns are starting to get noticed was the amount of national press the game garnered. There were stories Monday in the New York Times and the USA Today, among others, reporting on what they viewed as a compelling match-up. And even CBS found a way to allocate what appears to be the only high definition cameras it owns to the Browns/Steelers game.

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It sure would have been nice, then, had the Browns complied. Instead, the Browns didn't actually disappoint so much as prove that they are not quite ready yet for prime time. This is a team that's getting better, but it's not yet a good team. An overhaul of the defense and the displacement of a few coaches are the only things that stand in the way of that happening.

But despite the cold bucket of water that was Sunday's game, there was still progress, it just didn't show up in the statistics. The Browns managed 28 points in a game that in previous years would likely have resulted in a shutout. The skeptics may argue that at least 14 of those points are directly attributable to kick/punt returner Josh Cribbs, which is a strange way actually of diminishing his contributions.

Special teams is a third of any football team. They quite often are the difference in a game, particularly in the NFL where so many games are decided by a field goal. When you put Sunday's game in context, the Steelers almost lost despite playing superior offense and defense because of their repeated failures to execute on special teams.

The one player who has showed up every week thus far has been Josh Cribbs. Anderson has played well in large chunks and receiver Braylon Edwards is having a good overall season, though he hasn't been much of a threat the last two games. But Cribbs isn't just having a good season or even a break out season. He's having a Pro Bowl season. If he's not the most feared returner in the league, then it's only a matter of time.

Move over Jamir Miller, your days as the answer to the trivia question over who is the only Browns player to make the Pro Bowl since their return in 1999 is in jeopardy.

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The following question occurred to me while watching the New York Giants play the Dallas Cowboys Sunday night while wearing their "throwback" jerseys: If the Browns were to wear throwback jerseys, what would they look like and how could we tell?