

Heroes & Zeroes: Week 10

Written by {ga=mrburns}

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It's that time once again Browns fans ... as our Nick Allburn gives us the heroes & zeroes from last week's Browns game, just as he does every Friday. We know Cribbsie was a hero. We know Romeo, Willie McGinest, and Jamal were zeroes. But who else made Nick's column this week? And what did it do to the year to date standings? Find out inside.



The Browns lost to a better team on Sunday. The Browns were robbed by the refs. The Browns' playoff hopes could endure a loss. However you rationalize it, it's still the Steelers, and anytime the Browns snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, it still hurts.

On paper, this game shouldn't have been close. The Steelers out-gained the Browns 401 to 163. But two Joshua Cribbs kickoff returns and an interception allowed the Browns to carry the lead deep into the fourth quarter, and there's no way around the fact that they squandered a golden opportunity to defeat the Steelers for the first time in nine tries.

This Week's Zeroes

Five Demerits: Romeo Crennel

Sunday's game was a reminder why many still don't think that Romeo Crennel is the right man for the job.

With 3:13 left in the game, Ben Roethlisberger found Heath Miller for a 2-yard go ahead touchdown. While considering whether or not to challenge the play, the Browns called timeout. According to Crennel, a player on the field was worried that the Steelers would snap the ball for their extra point attempt before Crennel could challenge, and that unnamed player called timeout.

Crennel then challenged the catch, which was upheld, and the Browns forfeited their second timeout. If the Browns had simply challenged initially, they would have only lost one timeout, and they might have been able to get close enough for Phil Dawson to tie the game.

The problem here is that Crennel, his staff, and his team once again were out of sync with their clock management in a pressure situation. The player who called the timeout should have known better, and Crennel deserves some of the blame for the miscue.

Furthermore, the Browns went into an offensive and defensive shell in the second half. Honestly, didn't the second half defensive strategy of Crennel and Grantham feel eerily similar to the prevent scheme that Butch Davis and Foge Fazio instituted when the Browns fell to the Steelers in the 2003 playoffs?

Instead of staying aggressive on both sides of the ball to put the Steelers away, the Browns fell into the cliché trap of "playing not to lose." Against a talented team like the Steelers, that's the wrong strategy.

Four Demerits: Derek Anderson

Anderson was solid in the first half, posting three touchdowns against zero turnovers. Although the Browns were given a short field twice (90 yard Josh Cribbs kickoff return, Brodney Pool interception), Anderson still deserves credit for leading the offense to paydirt.

It was clear that the Steelers hoped to neutralize that Browns' vertical passing attack, especially deep routes to Braylon Edwards, and to a lesser extent, Kellen Winslow. Anderson responded and took what the defense gave him, attacking the Steelers with short, quick passes. DA finished the first half an efficient 10 for 16, passing for 80 yards.

The second half was a different story. Derek Anderson jogged into the locker room at halftime, and when he returned, he was the flustered quarterback of the preseason.

The contrast was incredible, as Anderson lost all semblance of touch passing, became gun shy, and began to bird-dog the dump off receiver. Before the final drive of the game, the Browns had not earned a single first down in the second half, as each drive ended with a punt or turnover.

For once, the offense hung the defense out to dry, as the offense' inability to sustain a drive of any significance kept the defense on the field nearly the entire second half. In fact, in the second half, the Browns had possession for **less than seven minutes**

The difference was palpable. In the first half, the defense was sufficiently rested, and stood up three times in the red zone to hold the Steelers to field goals. But forced to play nearly 80 percent of the second half, the defense caved, allowing 22 points.

This is hardly an indictment of Anderson, as Sunday was only his 11th NFL start and it came against a defense that is ranked number one in every major statistical category. Just as it was imprudent to deify Anderson in weeks prior, it would be foolish to let his struggles in Pittsburgh overshadow what remains a very impressive campaign.

The only thing that last week's loss confirmed was that Derek Anderson is mortal, and like every other quarterback in the NFL, subject to an off day. Given how impressive Anderson's overall performance has been thus far this year, he's certainly earned a mulligan or two.

Three Demerits: Jamal Lewis

Going into the Pittsburgh game, many were talking up Lewis' experience as a major positive for the Browns. Some touted the fact that Lewis has "run in big games" and knew how to run against the Pittsburgh defense. Apparently, Jamal is still learning.

Lewis fumbled twice (one lost) while carrying 16 times for 35 yards (2.2 YPC), and adding three catches for a paltry eight yards. Lewis didn't have much running room, so the low YPC average was excusable, but the fumbles were not.

Having played against the Steelers numerous times, Lewis shouldn't have been surprised that Pittsburgh's top priority was, and remains stripping the football from running backs. The Steelers punch, pull, and pry at the pigskin whenever the opportunity presents itself, but Lewis

didn't secure the ball accordingly. Lewis' third quarter fumble jump started the Pittsburgh comeback.

Honestly, with the exception of goal line scenarios, the Browns are not worse off with Jason Wright in the ballgame. Wright has progressed as a blocker, and remains an excellent receiving back, one of Lewis' weaknesses.

Lewis looked tired against Pittsburgh, which leads me to believe that a two back system might benefit the offense. Unless a team possesses a rare, premier talent at running back like San Diego's LaDainian Tomlinson, I'm a huge proponent of the two back system. Both running backs are well-rested, and the defense is continually shown a different look.

It's time for the Browns to consider instituting a "thunder and lightning" platoon, taking advantage of both Lewis' power, and Wright's speed and quickness. With Lewis nursing a bum foot and looking fatigued, giving Wright double digit touches every game might be just what the doctor ordered.

Two Demerits: NFL Officials

Usually, I'm completely against blaming officials for losses in any capacity. I'm breaking my rule for one week.

The Browns were hosed twice in the game's final minutes, both on Crennel's challenge of Heath Miller's touchdown catch, and the phantom holding call on Darnell Dinkins.

The recently amended NFL rules might state that Miller's catch was legal, but the rules committee may have out-thought themselves on this decision. If the receiver catches the football in the air, hit's the ground without getting two feet down, and ground helps the receiver gain possession of the football (i.e. the ball was clearly on the turf), it shouldn't be a catch. Until the day I die, that was not a catch.

As for the holding penalty, it was difficult to get a good look at a replay. That said, the "penalty" took place away from the play, didn't have any effect on the play, and wasn't blatant enough to be obvious in real time. With the game hanging in the balance, a few yards were the difference between Phil Dawson sending the game into overtime and the Browns losing to the Steelers for the ninth straight time. With all that in mind, it would have been an excellent no-call.

Instead, the Browns lost about 20 yards that they desperately needed for Dawson's field goal, and a few more valuable seconds. That penalty ultimately cost them a chance to beat the Steelers in overtime. It's always unfortunate when the officials dictate the outcome of the game, and Sunday was no different.

One Demerit: Willie McGinest

Willie McGinest is simply too slow to start in the NFL at this point. McGinest was burned on a play where he missed a tackle on Willie Parker, the pursued Parker, and appeared to running in quicksand.

On one of the game's most crucial plays in the fourth quarter, McGinest wasn't quick enough to stop Ben Roethlisberger from scrambling for 10 yards to convert a third-and-nine in the Cleveland red zone. Roethlisberger would throw the controversial touchdown pass to Heath Miller two plays later.

Don't the Browns have anyone more worthy of playing time? Do I dare ask for Chaun Thompson?

McGinest deserves credit for taking responsibility for his poor performance this week, calling it "[his] worst game as a Cleveland Brown." Considering that McGinest has delivered sub-par games by the boatload since his arrival in C-Town, that's a bold statement.

I like Willie McGinest; he is one of the all-time great linebackers, the consummate professional, and a high-character guy. The world needs more Willie McGinests. Unfortunately, the Browns need fewer Willie McGinests. Barring some miraculous turnaround down the stretch, McGinest, who is due approximately \$4 million next year, should be jettisoned in the off season.

This Week's Heroes

Five Dog Bones: Joshua Cribbs

Joshua Cribbs gives the Browns a tremendous advantage on kickoff returns. A solid 6-1, 215 pounds with sprinter's speed, Cribbs is a lock to reach the 30 yard line, and is a serious threat to take it to the house every time he returns a kick.

Cribbs' returning skills were on full display against the Steelers, as he had kick returns of 90 and 100 yards, the latter for a touchdown. Quite frankly, Cribbs came pretty darn close to beating the Steelers on his own.

Cribbs is now has two touchdown returns and is averaging an intimidating 32.4 yards per return; both stats place him second in the league among kick returners (with 10 or more returns). Let's face it, the upside of the Browns allowing 30-plus points on a weekly basis is that opposing teams have to kick to Cribbs each time they score.

While his kick returning prowess is obvious, Cribbs makes other special teams contributions that often go unnoticed. Cribbs is an excellent gunner, and he's always in the mix on kickoff coverage, having recorded seven solo tackles (eight total) on special teams. It doesn't end there.

Dennis Northcutt's departure, though welcomed by most, left the Browns with a major hole in the punt return game. The Browns didn't go out and sign anyone to replace Northcutt, but elected to let Cribbs

and seventh round pick Syndric Steptoe battle for the job in camp. By the end of the preseason, Cribbs had won the job, allowing the Browns to save a roster spot by letting Cribbs fill the roles of both punt and kick returner.

Cribbs hasn't blown the doors off on punt returns, but he's developed into an average returner. Considering how Cribbs struggled mightily with punt returns late last season, it's obvious that he worked hard to improve and his progress is admirable. Cribbs' north-and-south running style still isn't ideal for punt returns, but Cribbs' development into a competent punt returner is has helped the Browns at a position that could have caused them considerable grief this season.

Four Dog Bones: Offensive Line

During the first game against the Steelers, the Browns allowed six sacks. On Sunday, the Browns yielded no sacks to their rust belt rivals.

Of course, it isn't quite that simple. Some of the sacks the Browns gave up in September were due to poor quarterback play, and part of the reason the Browns blanked the Steelers in the sack department this time around was that Anderson was predominantly taking three step drops. Even so, six sacks is a huge disparity, and it speaks to the progress the line has made.

Derek Anderson isn't a quarterback who handles pressure well, but his

pass protection has been stellar so far this year. The line still has a long way to go with their run blocking, but that should improve as they develop more chemistry.

The Browns face the Ravens this weekend, so the line will once again be tested by a blitz-happy defense. Ray Lewis or not, at this point there isn't a defense out there that can get to Anderson at will, and given the atrocious line play we've seen for nearly a decade, that's cause for celebration.

Three Dog Bones: Eric Wright

Wright was something of a goat the first few games, as he was welcomed to the NFL with trial by fire. But Wright has quietly matured into a very promising young defensive back, and if the Browns can develop anything even remotely akin to a pass rush, the league will quickly learn that this kid is for real.

When Phil Savage pulled the trigger on a trade to draft Wright, it was a controversial decision due to Wright's collegiate problems with the law. Savage reassured fans that Wright was simply guilty of one youthful indiscretion, and that his character wouldn't be an issue. Low and behold, we haven't heard so much of a whisper of malfeasance from Eazy-E. Pacman Jones, this guy is not.

The future is bright for the Browns secondary, which is loaded with three day one draft picks. In particular, the tandem of Wright and

Bodden at cornerback should give offensive coordinators fits for years to come.

Two Dog Bones: Lawrence Vickers

Vickers is the best fullback the Browns have had since their resurrection. In addition to being a sound and powerful blocker, Vickers is faster than most traditional fullbacks and is a capable receiver. Vickers also has a habit of scoring against the Steelers, against whom he's scored the only two touchdowns in his career.

Vickers deserves around five touches per game on offense, as he's a strong runner who's uncharacteristically fast for a 250 pound fullback (he looks faster than his NFL Combine 40 time of 4.75). I really like Vickers' versatility, and he may have potential as a goal line back in the future, a la Mike Alstott.

One Dog Bone: Rob Chudzinski

Chudzinski once again showcased why he's building a reputation as a top-notch play caller. Two of Derek Anderson's three touchdown passes were the result of play fakes where the Steelers took the bait.

Chud's inventiveness near the goal line is a breath of fresh air, especially considering that the offensive line still has a ways to go as a

run blocking unit. Chudzinski is one of the three core coaches under contract through 2009 (Crennel and Grantham are the other two), so unless another team tries to pry Chud away from the Browns for a head coaching position, expect him to keep playing the Browns offense like a piano in the foreseeable future.

Standings

Dog Bones

Offensive Line---26

Derek Anderson---14

Braylon Edwards---13

Joshua Cribbs---12(t)

Kellen Winslow---12(t)

Demerits

Romeo Crennel---18

Defensive Line---16

Derek Anderson---13

Todd Grantham---10

Andra Davis---8

Playoff Picture

The Browns are now 5-4 and two games back of the Steelers. Their chances to win the division were definitely dealt a big blow with this loss, because not only do the Steelers lead the Browns by two full games in the standings, they also hold the head-to-head tiebreaker. In order to win the division, the Browns will have to make up three games on the Steelers in the only seven weeks, which is extremely unlikely.

If the Browns make the playoffs, it will be via the Wild Card. Presently, the Browns are trailing both the Jaguars and the Titans, who are both 6-3. The Browns are tied with the 5-4 Bills, which could make the Browns/Bills showdown in week 15 a huge match up.

The Browns are now into the weaker portion of their schedule, and only one team with a winning record (Buffalo) remains. If the Browns can get to 10-6, they have a good shot at the Wild Card, but if they can get to 11-5, a Wild Card birth is a virtual lock. It's time for this team to put up or shut up.

Up Next: 10/18, At Baltimore, M & T Bank Stadium, 1:00

All of the games from here on out are big, but this game is huge. The Browns can move two games above .500 while realistically ending Baltimore's season with a win.

There won't be a much better time to catch Baltimore. They are coming off of two embarrassing losses to divisional foes (Pittsburgh, Cincinnati), and they can't seem to move the football. Starting cornerback Samari

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Rolle is out, while Chris McAlister, Ed Reed, and Terrell Suggs are all questionable.

Kyle Boller will start at quarterback, replacing the painfully inadequate Steve McNair. Here's a team that the Browns defense should hold under 30 points.

We know the Browns can score on the Ravens, as they burned the vaunted Baltimore defense for 27 points in week four, even with a conservative approach in the second half. With the Ravens defense battered and bruised, the going should be even easier.

My Call: Browns 23, Ravens 13