

Lingering Items ... Baltimore Edition

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Gary B checks in with his Lingering Items on the day before Turkey Day, all of them concerning the Browns thrilling (and somewhat bizarre) 33-30 win in Crackmore last Sunday. Gary talks about the lack of discipline the Browns seem to exhibit at times, yet is thankful that we have a man of Romeo's character leading this team as opposed to a smug loser like Brian Billick. Thanks again for kicking the ball to Cribbs Brian!!



A few lingering items from last Sunday's Browns game...

Whatever shortcomings Romeo Crennel may have as a head coach, and they are plentiful, at least he's realistic. Grateful to have won the game on Sunday, he nevertheless properly tempered the win by pointing out the Browns can't continue to make a boatload of mistakes and expect to win many more games. Indeed. We know what happens when that occurs. Crennel's previous two years attest to that.

But more to the point, in the last two weeks, the Browns in general and the defense in particular have let leads of 15 and 14 points slip away. Perhaps that's understandable considering they do have the absolute worst defense in the league, ranked 32nd overall. And it's a ranking they well deserve. Pick a statistic and you can pretty much rest assured that the Browns defense ranks last: points per game, plays from scrimmage, yards per game, third downs converted (ok, in fairness they are 31st in this category), and fourth downs

converted.

Thus it's with very little concern when one or more of the defensive players go down with injuries. How bad can the replacement be? You can't rank any worse than 32nd.

But on the other hand, it's not like this is a recent development. The defense started bad against Pittsburgh and has stayed consistently bad through 10 games. It matters little whom they're playing, either. While they've played New England and Pittsburgh, two of the top offensive teams, they've also had games against St. Louis, Oakland and Baltimore twice, teams that rank in the bottom third offensively in the league, while Miami, another opponent, is close.

In other words, if you're waiting for the defense to arrive because of an apparently softer schedule remaining in the last six games, forget about it. This defense isn't going to get better until it gets overhauled.

The more disturbing development of the last few weeks, and perhaps what Crennel was really referencing, is the offense. Against both Pittsburgh and Baltimore, they hit a wall in the second half and had trouble moving the ball. While halftime adjustments by the opposing teams are playing some role, a

bigger issue, particularly in the Baltimore game, was a lack of discipline. Of the Browns 12 penalties on Sunday, half were for false starts. Two others were for holding. It's pretty difficult to sustain a drive when it's constantly one step up, five yards back.

Consider this lovely sequence from Sunday: With 8:47 left in the second quarter, the Browns took over at the 36 yard line following a 24-yard runback by Josh Cribbs. This runback became immediately and forever memorable because Cribbs seemed to have fumbled but it was overturned as a result of a Crennel challenge. He's now 3-23.

On second down and six, tackle Joe Thomas had a false start. The Browns eventually converted the first down, only to have guard Kevin Shaffer false start. Running back Jamal Lewis bailed them out of this penalty with a 21-yard run. Two first downs later and heading deep into Baltimore territory, Lewis was then called for holding, making it first and 20 from the Baltimore 24 yard line. It then became first and 30 from the Baltimore 34 yard line when Shaffer held on the next play. A short pass made it second and 15, which then was nullified by two Thomas false starts. On third and 30 from the Baltimore 34, Anderson hit tight end Kellen Winslow II on a 12-yard pass, taking the ball to the Baltimore 22 yard line, from which kicker Phil Dawson hit a field goal with 1:41 left, making it a 13-7 game. In all, 13 plays, over seven minutes off the clock and

only a field goal to show for it.

It may be too much to hold Crennel completely responsible for this kind of mess, but it does speak to a certain lack of discipline and preparation by the team. Ultimately, just like his inability to put together a mechanism that will increase the odds of successful replay challenges, these are the kind of fine details that Crennel has yet to infuse into this team. Not surprisingly, it's also the kind of fine details that separate the good teams from the also rans. Well, that and a good defense, but that's a project for the offseason.

As much as Crennel seems overmatched as a head coach, at least he's neither smug nor a sore loser. In other words, he's no Brian Billick. Rather than give the Browns even the slightest amount of credit for moving the ball into field goal position against his vastly overrated defense with 31 seconds remaining in regulation, Billick instead complained after the game and again on Monday about how his team was robbed of a victory by the officials, refusing to even acknowledge that the officials in fact got the ruling correct.

The Baltimore media, egged on by Billick, has treated this incident as if it was some sort of conspiracy to stick it to the Ravens. If only that were really true. Anyone and everyone who has seen the replay knows that Dawson's kick went through the uprights. Whether it then hit the support for the cross bar and bounced back, which is on the other side of the uprights, or some other obstruction, like a camera, matters little. A ball that passes through the uprights is good. That's the rule.

It would have been a bigger injustice for the referees to have blown the call. In fact, one official apparently did, which is what started the controversy in the first place. But when you watch the replay, it is clear that one official signaled that the ball went through and then bounced back, which is why he called it no good. The other official was unsure and gave no signal. The lack of consensus, required under NFL rules, dictated what followed next.

Of course, it's not hard to figure why Billick wants to keep the heat on the officials. It deflects the heat he should rightly get for kicking to Cribbs twice at the end of the game, particularly when you factor in that Ravens kicker Matt Stover had successfully squibbed and early kick that resulted in a touch back. It also deflects the heat he should rightly get for again having another lousy offense caused in no small part to his inability to again develop a quarterback. It also deflects the heat he should rightly get for having a porous offensive line that gave up six

sacks to the Browns. It also deflects the heat he should rightly get for a defense that is getting long in the tooth and is more effective these days talking a good game than in actually playing one. And finally it also deflects the heat he should rightly get for being 4-6 and winless in the division with only one game left-against Pittsburgh. Good luck with that.

New England head coach Bill Belichick seems to be the favorite coach to hate these days, but for my money that title rightly belongs to Billick and has for a long time. In fact, when he's shown the door by owner Steve Bisciotti, probably at season's end, they can retire that trophy permanently. Worse than being a sore loser, Billick is a poor sport.

One nice thing about the NFL is how quickly perspective can change. Two weeks ago, the Steelers overcame a 15-point lead to beat Cleveland and all the talk in Pittsburgh was how, basically, pedigree matters, the superior team finding a way to win. Fast forward a week and the Steelers lose to the woeful Jets. Now the talk is how the Steelers have struggled for the last two weeks, lucky were they to get past Cleveland and not as lucky against the Jets.

Likewise, the Browns. The talk last week was how the Browns blew a 15-point lead to lose a game they should have won. With the victory against Baltimore, the talk now is how the Browns blew a 15-point lead to lose a game they should have won. Otherwise they'd be 7-3. Okay, sometimes perspective doesn't change.

In my game story this week, I originally stated that it was Leigh Bodden that returned the Kyle Boller floater 100 yards for a touchdown. A reader quickly corrected me that it was Brodney Pool and I apologize for and corrected the mistake. In my defense, though, it was easy mistake to made, so accustomed had I become on Sunday to seeing the back of Bodden's jersey as he continued to chase Ravens receivers who were running past him.