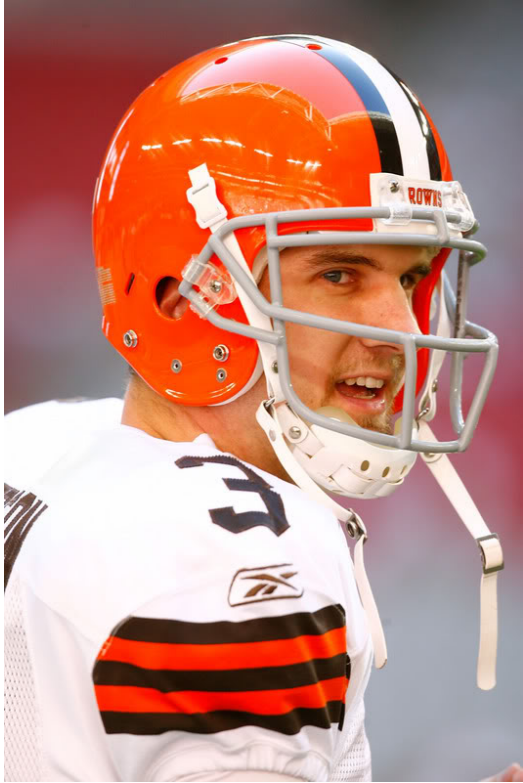


The Fork In The Road

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, December 12 2007 7:00 PM -

An up and coming team that hadn't been to the playoffs in over a half decade ... led by a promising young signal caller. The fan frustrations of the past flushed down the toilet by a promising new crop of likable star players. Destiny in their own hands with three games to play. Of course, I'm talking about the 1985 Browns. Gary Benz sees a lot of similarities between the '85 and '07 versions of this team, and he writes about it in his latest column for us.



As the season began its inevitable wind down, it looked to be different than the frustrations of the past. The fans had seen plenty to like as the season progressed, including the work of the young quarterback. The playoffs were certainly within reach but not necessarily a given, particularly for a team that had only seen the playoffs once in the previous seven seasons. The team even controlled its own fate by winning out, though every game in December seems bigger than the next when you're fighting for that elusive playoff spot. Unquestionably, the fan base was getting itchy.

The first game of that final three was against a team with a similar record and playoff aspirations of their own. Next was a game against a hated divisional rival from whom much had been expected but had again failed to deliver under a coach whose reputation often exceeded his actual accomplishments. Still, a game within your division can't be taken for granted, even if the team seemingly had nothing to play for. The final game would take them on the road, which is always a crap shoot no matter the circumstances.

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There also was much uncertainty about a head coach who, to that point, had shown only success as a lifelong assistant. In short, all the ingredients were there for creating all of the uncertainty that has plagued Cleveland sports fans for most of their lives. If nothing else, whatever promise those last three games held was met with skepticism that anything good would actually result.

Thus did the Cleveland Browns find themselves perched so precariously that a misstep in any direction would not only undo what had already been accomplished, but continue a an ever lengthening trend of unfulfilled expectations. The year was 1985.

In 2007, the Browns find themselves in a very similar spot. And what ultimately came out of those last three games for the 1985 Browns holds an interesting and valuable lesson for the current group and its fans: The team is at a fork in the road. Will it choose the right path?

The AFC Central, in 1985, was mostly mediocre. The Browns, the Bengals and the Steelers were fighting for the one playoff spot reserved for the division winner since none figured into the wild card mix. It was the year the Miami Dolphins and the Oakland Raiders would lead the AFC in wins, both finishing at 12-4. It was also the year Chicago would go 15-1, the only blemish being a loss to Miami. But these were hardly the only good teams. The New England Patriots, the New York Jets and the Denver Broncos all finished 11-5. In the AFC Central, each team was struggling with just getting to 8-8. Someone would have to win it, of course, but in the process a far more deserving team in another division would be left at home when the playoffs started.

To set the stage further, the Browns entered those final three games hanging on by a thread to the division lead at 7-6. Both Pittsburgh and Cincinnati were 6-7. To give you even more perspective on what a down year it was for the AFC Central, each of those teams had endured at least a three-game losing streak during the season. In fact, the Browns had a four-game streak in the middle of the season. Still, the Browns controlled the deck. Win out and they were in the

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playoffs. Win two of three and the other teams would have to win out just to tie.

First up for the Browns that year were the Seattle Seahawks, who, like this year's Buffalo Bills, were 7-6 and still technically alive in the playoff chase. But it was a road game for the Browns in a place that's always been mostly a black hole for them. So it wasn't a surprise, actually, when they were unceremoniously blown out by the Chuck Knox-coached Seahawks, 31-13. It pushed the Seahawks to 8-6 while the Browns sunk to 7-7.

The Steelers did the Browns a favor, though, losing to San Diego 54-42 and thus stood at 6-8. But the Bengals were on a roll. They blew out the Cowboys 50-24, tying them with the Browns. More importantly, Sam Wyche's Bengals looked like they were peaking at just the right time, having completed a Texas two-step the week before by also blowing out the Oilers, 45-27.

The Browns rebounded the following week, at home, against Jerry Glanville's Houston Oilers. Like the Bengals this year, the Oilers had plenty of talent but Glanville always had trouble marshalling it in any consistent fashion. The Browns did enough to win, 28-21, sending Glanville and the Oilers back to Houston where they'd finish the season 5-11. The Browns were now 8-7 and scoreboard watching.

Cincinnati cooperated, losing to Washington 27-24, but Pittsburgh did not, beating Buffalo 30-24. Thus, with one game remaining, the Browns were atop the division at 8-7 while both Cincinnati and Pittsburgh were 7-8. Again, the Browns controlled the deck, a win guaranteeing them a playoff spot. The Steelers were effectively out of it by that point because of an inferior intra-division record, the result of having lost to the Bengals twice and the Browns once. Both Cleveland and Cincinnati were 4-2 in the division but the other tiebreakers were in doubt since both teams had similar conference records and played conference games against common opponents in that last week.

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The Browns were headed to New York to play the Jets who were playoff bound. It showed. The Browns were blown out for the second time in three weeks and stood at 8-8. But just as it had gone that whole year for the AFC Central, neither the Bengals nor the Steelers could capitalize. The Steelers lost to the Giants while the Bengals were being handled 34-23 by New England. Thus, when the smoke cleared, and despite going only 1-2 in their final three games, the Browns were headed to the playoffs at 8-8.

It was a very soft 8-8. Whatever excitement that had been generated by the very thought of making the playoffs was clearly blunted by the collapse in the last three weeks and the fact that they were playing the Miami Dolphins, who stood at 12-4 and, again, were the only team that stood between the Chicago Bears and perfection.

As they say, when playoff season starts, every team stands even, some just more so than others. The Browns, not given much of a chance against the Dolphins, threw the scare of all scare into them and the rest of the league, leading at halftime 21-3. But the Dolphins rallied behind quarterback Dan Marino and ultimately prevailed 24-21.

Some losses, even playoff losses, are better than others and the Browns performance in that game, taking the Dolphins to the brink, completely reversed whatever negative feelings either the team or its fans had going into the game. In fact, the good will generated by that game carried over into the next season and actually served as a springboard for the next years. In 1986, the Browns finished 12-4 and were playoff fixtures the next five years. Right now, it's hard to remember anything more about that time. I think the Browns lost some tough playoff games. I can't remember to whom.

But the Browns of 1985 and the Browns of today, for all their surface-level similarities, were actually built quite different. Most notably, the strength of the Browns in 1985 was defense, something that would remain strong for the next several years. And though the offense of 1985 wasn't nearly as strong as their

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defensive counterparts, they were on the rise, particularly with Kosar as the quarterback. It didn't need an overhaul, just time to mature. The path had clearly been set.

This year's team is much further out of balance. The offense is as strong as it's ever been and is likely to remain so in the near term anyway irrespective of whether Derek Anderson or Brady Quinn is quarterback. But the defense has a far bigger hill to climb. There are a few promising players to build around, certainly, but the holes are vast and continued to be exposed each week. The right path is clear, walking down it isn't a given.

But putting all of that aside, what does seem to tie together both teams is the growing notion that this year, like 1985, is setting up as a foundation year for what most surely will take place over the next five or so years. This year's Browns team should make the playoffs and even if they do, they'll hardly be a favorite to get very far, which is where the 1985 team found themselves as well. Still, just as the 1985 team set in motion a winning culture, this year's team looks to do the same.

Whether this happens ultimately will come down to leadership and that's where the 1985 Browns had a distinct advantage. Schottenheimer, who is four years older than Crennel, was only 42 at the time. Crennel is 60. It makes a difference, a big difference, particularly in approach if only because Schottenheimer was young and still learning and embracing new techniques. Crennel is far more set in his ways.

As it played out, Schottenheimer turned into a very effective, if ultimately cursed, head coach. For all the confidence general manager Phil Savage seems to have in him, Crennel's long-term prospects will always be far less certain, not only because of his age but also for any or all of the number of reasons that already have been well chronicled. Facing similar odds as Crennel, Schottenheimer was able to literally move a team to the next level. But Schottenheimer wasn't saddled with questions about his competency the way Crennel has been. In the end, that

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may not make the difference, but have no doubt about it: the biggest question facing this franchise is not Anderson vs. Quinn. It's Crennel vs. history. Given how often history wins any contest, particularly in this town, it's why, with all the good that's been accomplished this season, a healthy dose of dread still remains.