

Lingering Items ... Jets Edition

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Thursday, December 13 2007 7:00 PM -

It's time for Gary Benz to address his Lingering Items from the Browns/Jets game, and in hindsight, Gary is mystified by two aspects of the Browns 24-18 win. The Browns inability to close games out easily. And the odd coaching decisions by Jets head coach Eric Mangini. Gary also takes some time out to hit on the cutback in penalties this week from the Browns, and also Bobby Petrino's abrupt resignation from the Atlanta Falcons.



It's been somewhat hard deciding which was more surprising during last Sunday's Browns game against the New York Jets: the coaching decisions of Jets head coach Eric Mangini or the near collapse by the Browns in a game that they had been dominating throughout.

But since Mangini's decisions were a byproduct of the near collapse, you'd have to rank the collapse first. After a few days reflection, it's still hard to figure exactly what happened during that last five minutes. I just know that it's stayed with me like Stadium hot dog.

It all started so innocently. The fourth quarter began with the Browns still moving on a drive that started with nearly three minutes left in the third quarter. The drive featured several decent runs from Jamal Lewis and even Jerome Harrison. But then quarterback Derek Anderson missed a short pass to Josh Cribbs, tight end Kellen Winslow was then flagged for offensive pass interference on a completion to receiver Braylon Edwards and Anderson then missed Winslow and the Browns settled for a 49-yard field goal from Phil Dawson. The score was now 17-6. More importantly, with a cold rain falling, the Jets couldn't have looked less interested in

the outcome or more interested in the warmth of their locker room.

Indeed, when Jets quarterback Kellen Clemens was intercepted by Brandon McDonald in the next series, even Jets fans had had enough. The Meadowlands was emptying as if a fire alarm had just gone off. The game was effectively over. All that stood between each team and a dry towel was six minutes and 30 seconds of meaningless football.

The Browns could have and should have accommodated the prevailing sentiments of players on both sides by eating up some clock, quickly. After all, to that point the game seemed to moving at near record pace anyway. But then, for no apparent reason, the tide turned.

Anderson handed off to Lewis who lost a yard. Huh? Hadn't the Jets just packed it in? Then Anderson misfired on two short passes, neither one of which would have garnered a first down based solely on the length of the pass. Suddenly, it was 4th and 11 and the Browns were forced to punt. The Browns had used a grand total of 49 seconds. Still, it didn't feel like there had been any real momentum shift.

Looks and feelings, though, can be deceiving. Clemens and the Jets proceeded to put together their most impressive drive of the day, taking over from their own 31-yard line, calling the plays from the line of scrimmage, and moving down with an effectiveness that had eluded them all day. The Browns defense dutifully complied, as they have so many other times to so many other teams, putting up little opposition, particularly when Clemens completed the drive via a quarterback sneak from the 1-yard line. A game that wasn't nearly as close as the score was now suddenly as close as the score, 17-12.

If the Browns hadn't yet sensed that the Jets were turning serious when they tried for the two-point conversion, they certainly knew it a few moments later when the Jets successfully executed an onside kick. A few plays later, when Mike Nugent kicked a field goal bringing the score to 17-15, the sucking sound you heard was that made when the collective backsides on the Browns side of the field puckered at once.

We know what happened next, and in a funny way, it caused at least as many problems as it solved. The Jets tried another onside kick but were unsuccessful. The Browns took over with a renewed sense of actually trying to ice the game. The problem is, Jamal Lewis picked right then to have his most impressive run of the year. Instead of allowing his team to methodically move down the field, Lewis went and broke through an opening in the Jets line and galloped 31 yards for a touchdown. On the one hand, it put the Browns back up by nine. On the other hand, it happened so quickly that the Jets still had plenty of time.

It was then and only then that Mangini got, shall we say, creative with his decision-making process, probably costing his team a legitimate shot at pulling out a win they clearly didn't deserve.

The fact that the Browns were seemingly throwing up all over themselves at exactly the wrong time is a problem, of course, particularly entering these final crucial games. But there is a larger lesson to be learned from all of this and it, too, has an impact on those final crucial games.

The conventional wisdom is that once a team is out of playoff contention, it has nothing to play for and hence is an easy mark. But that conventional wisdom is generally espoused by pop psychologist wannabes who don't have an appreciation for the psyche of the professional athlete.

If there is one trait common to virtually every pro athlete, irrespective of the sport, it's that they are insecure. It's a trait, by the way, that the coaches instill in them and nourish every day, letting them know that there's always another player waiting in the wings to take their jobs and at a cheaper rate usually. Thus, even when the team goals are out of reach players generally don't quit. They are playing for jobs for the next year and they know it. It's why, for example, the Jets found a way to stop Jamal Lewis for a loss on that drive late in the fourth quarter and the game seemingly out of reach. See, there was something to play for and they knew it. And suddenly, what the heck, why not try to win the game in the process?

This is something, hopefully, the Browns remember when they take on Cincinnati and San Francisco during the last two weeks in the season. It's something, hopefully, the fans will remember too. Even when it seems like a team has nothing at stake, that doesn't mean the individual players don't. Their pride, feed by the insecurity monster, will manifest itself in a desire to continue to make plays, for if they don't they may find themselves out of a job when training camp rolls around next season. Pro football may be a tough sport, but it pays well.

If Sunday's game seemed to mostly lack for excitement, there's a good reason. The bulk of the game and the point scores were confined to late in the first half and late in the second half. The Browns and Jets scored 10 points in the last six minutes of the first half. They scored 20 more in the last five minutes of the second half. That translates to 50 minutes of chess and 10 minutes of rollerball.

The other reason the game seemed to lack for excitement, and in a good way, was the relative absence of the kinds of mistakes that have plagued this team in many, many games this season. The Browns were well below their season average of seven penalties per game, committing only four penalties for 29 yards.

Their first penalty didn't come until 5:23 left in the first half. Anderson was flagged for delay of game which was caused by the play coming in late. The remaining three all came in the fourth quarter: Winslow's pass interference call, an illegal motion penalty on Cribbs during a Dave Zastudil punt and then a penalty you'll not likely see again in this lifetime, Leon Williams offsides as the Browns were receiving the Jets kick. Making it even more bizarre is that the Jets weren't even attempting an onside kick. But that penalty nullified a penalty by the Jets for kicking it out of bounds and gave them another chance at an onside kick, which, fortunately, was unsuccessful.

But there were no holding calls, no false starts and no personal fouls. At least for one game, the Browns did get this problem corrected, just as head coach Romeo Crennel had promised the week before.

Based on the reaction of some of the Atlanta Falcon players to the abrupt resignation by head coach Bobby Petrino, you would have thought that he was a convicted felon with a drug problem. Wait, that's Michael Vick, one of their own. It's funny how the Falcon players were all over Petrino for supposedly quitting on them while, at the same, time essentially defending a true criminal, like Vick, just the night before by wearing "Free Michael Vick" t-shirts and otherwise paying homage to him on the day he was sentenced to 23 months in prison. I've yet to hear even one player speak out publicly on the devastation Vick has brought to that team when he quit on them. But a first year coach who walks away from a team and a group of players with such misguided principles is a pariah? Hard to fathom.

Here's a question to ponder: What was more fun, the Steelers being drilled by the Patriots or the Ravens being drilled by the Colts? Ok, that's too easy, it's a tie.