

Heroes & Zeroes: Week 14

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Friday, December 14 2007 7:00 PM -

Jamal Freaking Lewis. The guy just screams Cleveland Browns football. And I love the idea of him toting the pill for us down the stretch, as every game we play from here on out will be outside in inclement weather. Nick Allburn loves Jamal this week as well, as he heads the list of heroes for the orange and brown this week. Nick hands out all his dog bones and all his demerits (including five for Chud) in this excellent weekly column he does for us.



Well, that was easy...for about 55 minutes or so. Just when it looked like the Browns would lock up a ho-hum road victory against the sorry, albeit scrappy Jets, things became a bit more complex.

While the Jets were able to move the ball with ease in the second half, the Boy Genius made a few questionable decisions, and the Browns were able to keep the Jets out of the end zone for the most part. The Cleveland defense limited the Jets to six field goals, two of which came in the final stanza.

When's the last time you saw three onside kicks in one NFL game? How about three onside kicks **by the same team**? Six of the last seven Browns games have now been decided by seven points or fewer, and it seems that bizarre finales are the flavor of the year for these Cleveland Browns; win or lose, they've certainly been entertaining. And after years of watching football that was uninspired, undisciplined, and borderline unbearable, what more can you ask for?

This Week's Heroes

Five Dog Bones: Jamal Lewis

For the fourth consecutive game, Jamal Lewis looked stellar. Lewis had 137 yards and two scores on 24 touches, one via reception and the other by way of a vehement 31-yard run that said "I dare you to tackle me."

Lewis' long run sealed the deal and let several degenerate gamblers (nobody I know...) off the hook, as the Browns were a 3.5 point favorite. Jamal seems to be getting stronger as the year progresses, and he also seems to be getting healthier. Lewis doesn't quite have the breakaway speed of yesteryear, but that said, I've never seen him run harder.

When Baltimore jettisoned Jamal in favor of Willis "I might be your father" McGahee, didn't the Ravens cite Lewis' poor receiving abilities as one of the reasons for his dismissal? That seemed an odd claim, considering that Lewis caught 47 passes for 442 yards during the 2002 campaign. At any rate, Lewis has proven himself a capable receiving option for quarterback Derek Anderson, on the rare occasion that Anderson throws a decent swing pass.

A quick aside. Former Bills running backs seem to have an affinity for fathering illegitimate children. Question: How many illegitimate children do former Buffalo runners Travis Henry and Willis McGahee have between the two of them? If you guessed 11, you guessed correctly. Henry holds a commanding 9-2 lead over McGahee, but considering that Henry is almost three years McGahee's senior, Willis definitely has the potential to mount a comeback. After all, McGahee's dissatisfaction with the females in the Buffalo area is [well-documented](#), so maybe a change of scenery will get McGahee back into the game.

Four Dog Bones: The Offensive Line

For the fifth time this year, the line kept Derek Anderson's jersey spotless. Anderson has been sacked more than once in a game only twice this season.

For the year, Anderson's been sacked only 11 times, less than one sack per game. To put that into perspective, last season, Anderson and Charlie Frye were sacked 52 times combined. In 2005, Frye and Trent Dilfer teamed up to get sacked 45 times.

Still, nothing compared to the flogging Tim Couch absorbed his rookie year: 56 sacks, despite starting only 13 games. Couch is hardly a beloved figure in Cleveland sports, but as an associate of mine [wrote last Sunday](#), Couch had some pretty amazing moments for such a lackluster career. I don't think Couch had the physical tools to be a great quarterback, but if he'd had a team around him and the opportunity hold the clipboard for more than three quarters, he could have been solid, if unspectacular.

But returning from that quick digression, the number one reason that the Browns are better this season is the improved play of the offensive line. That's not to say that other parties, like Derek Anderson, Jamal Lewis, and the receivers haven't done their part, because they have, but the line has been the catalyst for everything the Browns have done on offense this season.

Three Dog Bones: Braylon Edwards

Braylon Edwards may have had only three catches, tying his second-lowest total of the year, but he made those three catches count. Edwards had one of the year's most spectacular catches on a fourth-and-four jump ball from Derek Anderson, a 45 yard catch and run, and a spectacular leaping touchdown grab which tied him with Gary Collins for the most single-season touchdown receptions in Cleveland Browns history (13). Edwards has now found the end zone in nine games, being held scoreless only four times, which is about as consistent as you can ask a receiver to be.

Braylon Edwards, Pro Bowl. Book it.

Two Dog Bones: Sean Jones

Sean Jones is the most important Browns defender. Sunday was just another day at the office for Jones, who totaled seven tackles (six solo), half a sack, and a key interception.

Jones' interception early in the second quarter terminated a New York drive that got within a yard of the Cleveland end zone. At the time the game was scoreless, and Jones' interception kept the Jets from building any early momentum, while sucking the life out of the New Yorkers and New Jersey-ites in attendance.

Lone Bone: Brad Kassell

I've always been a big fan of Brad Kassell ever since he played his college ball in the Lone Star State for the North Texas Mean Green. I actually have a North Texas Fathead on my wall, which I bought after it was recommended to me by my favorite quarterback, Ben Roethlisberger, in a [commercial](#) worthy of an Oscar nomination. I fondly remember watching day two coverage of the 2002 NFL Draft and cursing at Butch Davis when he passed on Kassell round after round.

Actually, that's a total fabrication. I had no idea who Brad Kassell prior to last weekend, I detest everything that's come out of Texas except Phil Dawson and [TonyHomo.com](#), and I have nothing but deep-seething hatred for that Pittsburgh quarterback who wears number seven.

Even so, Kassell's recovery of New York's first onside kick was a fine, leaping

play, and the guy deserves major props for a job well done. Fortunately for the Browns, Joe Jurevicius came up big by recovering the following two onside kick attempts.

This Week's Zeroes

Five Demerits: Rob Chudzinski

Chud called a great game for about three quarters. He slipped up in the fourth quarter.

With about 10 minutes left, the Browns held a 17-6 lead, and looked primed to run out the clock. Derek Anderson had struggled in the second half, perhaps due to the rain, but Jamal Lewis was starting to have his way with the New York defense, who clearly were tired of tackling the 245-pounder.

After Lewis ran for 28 yards to pick up a first down and move the ball into Jets territory, the Browns ran on the next play and lost two yards. Derek Anderson threw on the next two plays, both incompletions. The Browns were forced to punt.

When the Browns got the ball back for their next possession, Lewis once again got the call on the first play, but lost a yard. As before, Chud called for passes on the two ensuing plays, Derek Anderson was unable to complete either pass, and the Browns were forced to punt with 5:41 remaining.

Had the Browns elected to run on those four plays instead of pass, they may have picked up more first downs, and they at least would have run another three

minutes off of the clock. At the time the decision to throw seemed of little consequence, but had the Browns run the football and milked clock a little bit more, the bizarre events that unfolded in the final five minutes probably would not have occurred.

Four Demerits: Dave Zastudil

Perhaps it's the result of a lingering injury, but the D-Zaster has not been the same punter he was last season. Zastudil did a great job pinning the opposition inside the 20 last season, landing 34.6 percent of his punts inside the 20.

This season, Zastudil's numbers have dwindled, as his percentage of punts inside the 20 has dropped to 28.6 percent. Zastudil's net yardage numbers have also declined from 38.4 yards per punt to 35 yards per punt.

Fortunately, the improved offense has meant that the Browns have had to punt far less frequently, but Zastudil's struggles are still unsettling. These problems may just be the lingering effects of the back injury Zastudil suffered earlier this season, and hopefully Zastudil can return to form next year.

Three Demerits: Anthony Smith

Leave it to the Steelers to shoot their mouths off. Anthony Smith, a second year defensive back from Syracuse, made a well-publicized [victory guarantee](#) prior to playing the New England Patriots.

Good call, Anthony. Bill Belichick, master of motivation, could probably find a way to get his players riled up for having their laundry facilities criticized, let alone an opposing player guaranteeing victory. Can you imagine the Grinch-like grin that

must have spread across Belichick's face when he heard of Smith's antics? Who am I kidding, Bill Belichick never smiles.

Smith was torched on several occasions during the Pats/Steelers showdown, as the Patriots won in blowout fashion. Don't think that Smith's guarantee fired up the Patriots? After the Patriots scored their first touchdown, Tom Brady, not exactly known as a motor-mouth, sought out Smith to bark in his face. Watching the Steelers get embarrassed never gets old.

Two Demerits: Todd Grantham

The defense held the Jets to 18 points, but 12 of those points came by way of four field goals. Translation: the Jets were moving the football.

The Jets actually out-gained the Browns 387 to 337 in total yardage. Part of it's attributable to the Browns going into somewhat of a prevent defense in the second half, which begs the question: why do the Browns ever play prevent? More often than not this season, playing a prevent defense has burned the Browns.

The Browns simply must find new ways to generate a pass rush. You can have the best coverage in the world (which, by the way, the Browns do not), but no defensive back can cover an NFL receiver for 10-plus seconds.

One Demerit: New York Fans

Giants Stadium was like a ghost town on Sunday. Now I'm willing to cut Jets fans some slack on leaving early; their team was losing, the Jets stink, and the weather looked quite unpleasant. However, there were probably more Browns fans than

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Jets fans at the stadium by the time the clock hit triple-zero.

There's an empty stadium, and there's an **EMPTY** stadium, and this was the latter. There were entire sections completely devoid of fans. It was like watching an extended preview for Will Smith's

[*I Am Legend*](#)

Fair weather fans? I'm afraid so.

Standings

Total Dog Bones

Offensive Line---27
Braylon Edwards---20
Kellen Winslow---18
Joshua Cribbs---17
Derek Anderson---16

Net Dog Bones

Offensive Line---25
Kellen Winslow---18
Braylon Edwards---16
Joshua Cribbs---15
Jamal Lewis---9

Total Demerits

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Romeo Crennel---25
Derek Anderson---16(t)
Defensive Line---16(t)
Brian Billick---12(t)
Todd Grantham---12(t)

Net Demerits

Romeo Crennel---17
Brian Billick---12(t)
Defensive Line---12(t)
Todd Grantham---11
Andra Davis---8

Playoff Picture (as of late Thursday)

Houston's defeat of Denver really helped the Browns. At this point, the only two teams that pose a real threat to the Browns are the Buffalo Bills and the Tennessee Titans, significantly upping the ante for this Sunday's game. If the Browns win and the Titans lose to Kansas City, the Browns will clinch their first playoff birth since 2002.

Games to watch this week include Tennessee at Kansas City, Jacksonville at Pittsburgh, and Detroit at San Diego.

Up Next: Buffalo Bills, Cleveland Browns Stadium, 1:00

Most of my thoughts on this game can be found [here](#) .

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Suffice to say that this game will be a huge barometer as to how far the Browns have really come this year. All I'll add to what I wrote earlier this week is that this is absolutely a team the Browns should beat, and if the Browns can't beat the Bills, then quite frankly they don't deserve to make the playoffs.

As someone who lives in a Buffalo Bills television zone, I watch a lot of Bills football (the only teams I watch more are the Browns and Steelers) and I urge you not to be frightened by Buffalo's 7-6 record or their winning six of their last eight games. They aren't for real, but the Browns can't take them lightly.

My Call: Browns 31, Bills 20