

Preview: Browns at Bengals

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Friday, December 21 2007 7:00 PM -

Win and we're in. It's that simple. The last time these teams met, the Browns responded from a deflating opening week one loss to the Steelers and defeated the Bengals 51-45 in Cleveland. Tomorrow they meet in the Queen City with a playoff berth on the line for the Brownies. Cincinnati is in the midst of a terrible season, but seems inspired to help ruin the Browns year. Jesse previews tomorrow's second installment of the Battle of Ohio.



Time: Sunday, December 23, 1:00 PM

Location: Paul Brown Stadium, Cincinnati

Network, Announcers: CBS- Greg Gum-Ball and Dan Dierdorf.

Line: Browns by 3

Team W/L Records: Cleveland is 9-5; Cincinnati is 5-9

Coaches: Romeo Crennel is 19-27 in his third season with the Browns; Marvin Lewis is 40-38 in his fifth season with the Bengals.

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Last Week for the Browns: Shut out the Bills 8-0 amid Hoth-like conditions at CBS- another snapshot of this memorable season.

Last Week for the Bengals: Lost to the 49ers 20-13, in a crap-fest witnessed by an unfortunate few on the NFL Network.

All-Time Series: Tied, 34-34

Last Meeting: Week Two- The 51-45 shootout at the Lakefront.

Out or Questionable for Cincinnati: RB Rudi Johnson (hamstring) is out; S Madiou Williams (quad) is doubtful; T Willie Anderson (knee) and S Dexter Jackson (calf) are questionable

Out or Questionable for Cleveland: NT Ethan Kelley (knee) and LB Antwan Peek (ankle) are questionable

What to watch for the Bengals: This wasn't the season-ending scenario they envisioned in Cincinnati back in the summer- a losing record, a struggling offense, and a locker room as dysfunctional as dinnertime at the

[DeFeo's](#)

(okay, maybe they did envision the last part). They also didn't envision a scenario in which they'd be playing spoiler in their Week Sixteen meeting with the Browns. But that's what it's come to.

Every team circling the drain of a crappy season spends a certain amount of time larding up the virtues of being a spoiler. In Cincinnati's case, however, the words ring especially hollow. Carson Palmer is [talking big](#), but he's leading the NFL in interceptions and lately hasn't been on the same wavelength with Chad Johnson

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and T.J. Houshmandzadeh, who as a tandem apparently are in the process of [alienating](#) their entire locker room. Noted Browns killer Rudi Johnson probably won't suit up at all. Cincinnati's defense is its usual generous self (26

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in yards and points given up) and its usually reliable offense has sputtered, scoring 10, 19, and 13 points the last three weeks and utterly failing to take advantage of the 49ers' clear desire to gift the Bengals last Saturday's game, perhaps in return for Bill Walsh and those Super Bowls.

So, yeah... they suck. But they have an opportunity to destroy Cleveland's playoff dreams- or at any rate, severely cripple them. Will they embrace that opportunity? Or are they just looking to get this miserable season over with?

What to watch for the Browns: Here's the gist of it. Cleveland is in sole possession of the AFC's last playoff spot, one game ahead of Tennessee. If the Browns win on Sunday and finish with the same record as the Titans, they're in, because they would have a better conference record (8-4 to 7-5). If the Browns lose on Sunday and finish with the same record as Tennessee, they're out, because they would have the same conference record (7-5) and the next tiebreaker- record against common opponents- would favor the Titans (4-1 to 2-3). If the Browns win out, and if Baltimore somehow beats the Steelers in Week 17, they're AFC North champs. If they lose out, they would need the Titans to lose out as well, to the Jets and Colts.

Sunday's game is the most important of the season and probably the most important for the franchise since the return. It's great that the Browns have clinched a winning record, it's wonderful that they now have Pro Bowlers and a true team identity for the first time since 1999,

and it's terrific that after giving us years of mind-numbingly boring play, they've served up edge-of-the-seat excitement all season long. But they can't get this close just to fall short. Spending January at home makes for a rather lukewarm Season of Dreams.

Everyone thinks it's New England's year. But maybe it isn't. Maybe the Patriots are a little too one-dimensional offensively- albeit superb in that one dimension- and maybe their old, slow defense can be exploited to the fullest, Maybe Cleveland's offense is too diverse and explosive for anyone to stop. Maybe the young defense has progressed all the way from awful to mediocre, and is capable of at least holding teams down and let the offense play from ahead. Maybe the Browns will freight-train into the playoffs with more steam and momentum than anyone else. Maybe we'll get those weird breaks everyone else seems to get. Maybe we're the 2003 Panthers. Maybe we're the 2001 Patriots. Maybe it's our year.

We're sixty minutes away from being back in the playoffs for the first time since 2002. And this time, this team can do some damage.

Bad Past Loss to the Bengals: September 18, 1986: Cincinnati 30, Cleveland 13- Prior to the Thursday Night clash, Mayor Voinovich declared it "Light up Cleveland Night". Then the Bengals came in and turned out the lights, battering Marty Schottenheimer's vaunted defense for 257 rushing yards in a game the Bengals blew wide open after halftime. James Brooks and Larry Kinnebrew combined for 212 yards on the ground and Kinnebrew, a 260-pound wrecking ball of a fullback, also plowed over for three touchdowns.

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Good Past Win over the Bengals: December 21, 1986: Cleveland 34, Cincinnati 3- Twelve weeks later, the teams met again at Riverfront Stadium in a showdown that would decide the AFC Central championship. On Cleveland's first play from scrimmage, Bernie Kosar hit Reggie Langhorne for a 66-yard gain, and the rout was on. The Bengals came in averaging 27 points per game and ranked #1 in total offense, but didn't get into the end zone once against Cleveland's vengeful defense. It was the second time in six years the Browns had clinched the AFC Central crown in Riverfront Stadium.

Next Week for Both Teams: Cleveland hosts the 49ers; Cincinnati finishes its season at Miami.

Trivia: With their defeat last Saturday in San Francisco, the Bengals have now clinched their first losing season since 2002, and the first since Marvin Lewis took over as head coach.