

Melting Down

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, December 23 2007 7:00 PM -

The NFL season can be painfully long and deceptively short, so too can a game, particularly if you're a struggling team or a team trying to get back into the playoffs for only the second time in the last nine seasons. For the Browns, Sunday's game against AFC North rival Cincinnati Bengals was much too long and now the season may be a game or two too short, as the Browns collapsed under the pressure of expectations, losing to the 5-9 Bengals 19-14.



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The loss, coupled with the Tennessee Titans 10-6 win over the NY Jets forces the Browns into a must-win situation next week at home against the San Francisco 49ers. But even that may not be enough. The Browns loss now gives the Titans the upper hand in the hunt for the last playoff spot in the AFC. For the Browns to get in, the Titans still have to lose next week against an Indianapolis team that is likely to be resting. If you're into trends, right now you're probably terrified at the thought of what this Browns team might do in another pressure game against an

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inferior opponent. But that's for next week.

For now, though, it's enough to ponder the devastation that Sunday's loss may very well have on the entire Browns season. It certainly wasn't a beat down in the same way as the loss the Browns suffered in the first week of the season against the Pittsburgh Steelers. Indeed, the Bengals simply aren't good enough to put a licking on anyone. But given what was at stake, this loss was in many ways much more painful.

Based solely on the composure the Browns showed last week in the snow against the Buffalo Bills, the abject dysfunction this week that cost the Browns this game was particularly unexpected and stung particularly hard.

That dysfunction was pretty well entrenched by halftime, despite a late charge that could have but didn't result in the win. The Browns were a team playing tight; like a team playing under the kind of pressure for which it just wasn't quite ready. Put the blame wherever you might, but inasmuch as it looked like a collective meltdown, head coach Romeo Crennel and his entire staff looked like a good place to start.

On offense quarterback Derek Anderson was wildly out of sorts. Statistics notwithstanding, his passes were flying everywhere at every moment. Balls were overthrown, underthrown, and thrown into the arms of Bengals defenders, four times in all. On the day he was 29-48 for 250 yards, two touchdowns and those four interceptions.

There were penalties galore, including drive-stunting holding calls in two crucial situations in the first half. There was a botched hold on the field goal. There were

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difficult catches that just weren't made, time and again. In total, the day featured the kind of mistakes that bad teams make and playoff teams don't; the kind that first multiply and then crush. And while the mistakes certainly did crush the Browns, for sheer torture there was nothing worse than the parade of horrors in the last 1:44 of the first half, just when it appeared as though the Browns might actually escape the half down only 3-0. Instead, it was shortly 19-0 and the game was effectively out of reach.

After the Browns' defense, which had spent the half engaging in its own misadventures trying to contain a Bengals running game that was mostly inept all season and missing its top running back, stopped the Bengals with a three and out deep in their own territory, Anderson made possibly his worst pass of the season, for the moment anyway, on the very next play, directly in the arms of cornerback Nedu Nkudwe, who returned it 44 yards to the Browns 5-yard line, breaking through tackles as if the defense was on the field. Of course, the predictable happened on the next play as Palmer found receiver T. J. Houshmandzadeh in the end zone, extending the lead to 13-0.

But that was just the appetizer. For the main dish, after Cribbs took the ensuing kickoff to the Browns 35-yard line, only to have a D'Qwell Jackson personal foul nullify the run, Anderson then threw his latest worse pass of the season, trying to force it into Braylon Edwards long when Kellen Winslow was open underneath. Leon Hall intercepted and three plays later Watson pushed his way into the end zone from the two yard line. About the only thing that went right was the Browns holding the Bengals out of the end zone on the two point conversion attempt to keep the score at 19-0, although that was a bit of an adventure as well as linebacker Willie McGinest seemingly tried to call time out with none left when he realized that there were only 10 men on the field. Fortunately, the Browns were rescued from their own negligence by a time clock official who had not reset the 25-second clock.

The closest the Browns came to scoring in that first half was in the first quarter

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following a Bengals punt that took the Browns to their own 10-yard line. A couple of nice runs by Jamal Lewis and Jason Wright, a good catch and run by tight end Kellen Winslow, Jr. and the Browns were deep into Bengals territory. But the drive fizzled forcing a Phil Dawson 39-yard field goal attempt.

But in just one of a series of mistakes by the entire team that typified the day, punter Dave Zastudil mishandled a perfect snap. As a result, he never got the hold down and was forced to eat it, killing the drive. The field goal was hardly a gimme in the first place. Dawson was lined up near the right hash mark kicking back into a strong left to right breeze that was literally moving the goal posts from side to side.

The botched attempt didn't end up costing them nearly as much as the botched fourth and one shortly thereafter following Leigh Bodden's interception that he returned to the Bengals 28-yard line. By not getting that first down, indeed by not scoring, the Browns ended the first quarter with two possessions deep in Bengals territory and absolutely nothing except frustration to show for it. It wasn't perfect and it sure wasn't sublime.

The second half was like high school prom night. Lots of tease, very little payoff. Statistically the Browns dominated but still found themselves biting through their lower lips in frustration when the game ended, contemplating what could have been. And it wasn't as if the Bengals weren't trying to help. They spent the second half playing mostly not to lose and mostly doing just the opposite.

For example, they basically went three and out in every drive but their last. Moreover, at two different points, with the game seemingly firmly in their hands, they floundered. The first time was with 7:35 left in the fourth quarter, just after Anderson's fourth interception of the day and the Bengals holding a seemingly safe 19-7 lead. But Bengals head coach Marvin Lewis suddenly got inventive.

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Oops. Palmer looked deep to Houshmandzadeh who slipped. Bodden stepped in front for his second interception of the day. Three plays later, Anderson found receiver Braylon Edwards for his second touchdown and franchise leading 15th touchdown catch of the year. Suddenly a game that was out of reach was now within reach at 19-14 and nearly six minutes to play.

The next time came on the next series with 5:57 left. The Browns, forced to dance with the one they brought, stood mostly by while the Bengals and Watson literally ran it down the throats of the Browns front seven, which is more a technical description. If you're looking for something a bit more descriptive, it would be the Browns front sieve.

Play after play, it was Watson up the middle, with an unexpected and highly successful double reverse that Chad Johnson took for 16 yards. But on Watson's eighth carry of the drive, he fumbled into the arms of Jackson at the Browns 22 yard line with 1:48 to play and two time outs.

But if you expected miracles, then you probably weren't watching very closely the whole day. The drive, which, again, is more a technical description, featured lots of completed passes but for very little gain. For good measure, it also featured some horrific clock management caused mostly by Anderson's fascination with crossing patterns that probably cost the Browns at least 30 of the 108 seconds they had to work with.

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With six seconds remaining, Anderson was forced out of the pocket from the Bengals 35-yard line. He made out of bounds with one second left. The final gasp was a pass that fell well short of Edwards. With that, the Browns were left to wander into their locker room, leaving the team bus idling in the parking lot while they watched the Tennessee/New York Jets game in the locker room, hoping that the Titans would likewise crumble under the pressure and hand the Browns their playoff berth.

It would be a mistake, however, to let what occurred late obscure the fact that in the second half the Browns had two drives that started in Bengals' territory and had nothing to show for it. In fact, those drives resulted in more turnovers—one—than points and as much as anything else told the story of the game

Even when the Browns did show some life, for example after Anderson's first touchdown pass to Edwards that gave Edwards the franchise single-season touchdown record, they couldn't sustain the momentum. On their next series Anderson's arm was hit as he was throwing in the direction of Tim Carter on fourth and nine killing still another promising drive.

To the extent there were any real positives on this otherwise miserable day, it was Edwards' two touchdowns and his franchise record. He caught eight passes overall but for only 52 yards. Lewis, too, was a bright spot, carrying the ball 15 times for 92 yards and getting 42 more yards on five catches. Winslow played well with seven catches for 73

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yards, but as most losses ultimately are an inside job, all of these individual performances were well obliterated by all the mistakes that bookended them.

Now the Browns head into the last game of the season with no chance to win the division and no longer controlling their fate. If Crennel really is a candidate for the coach of the year, then the true test of whether he deserves such accolades will be if he can find a way to ensure that his team is more ready to play next week than it was this week. But given how this was the same test he faced this week, it's hard to like Crennel's or the Browns' chances.