

Lingering Items ... Season-Ending Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, January 01 2008 7:00 PM -

Gary Benz's Browns commentary was one of our most popular features in '07 with thousands and thousands of people logging on from all over the globe to read his Sunday night initial reaction column, and his mid week Lingering Items piece. In his season ending version of Lingering, Gary reflects on the season, wondering what could have been if things broke a little different for this team. A superb year in review column from GB.



Sunday's game against the San Francisco was hardly high art or compelling drama. In the end all it proved was that the Browns have a much stronger foothold in the future than do the 49ers. But that game really wasn't what had the fans gnashing their teeth anyway. That was reserved for the Tennessee Titans/Indianapolis Colts game that took place later that night.

Though the game meant everything to the Titans and nothing to the Colts, the Titans still struggled against the Colts reserves, just as they had struggled against the Jets starters the week before, making everyone wonder exactly how the Titans actually won 10 games this season.

But win 10 games they did and they were a better set of wins, at least as far as NFL wild card tiebreakers are concerned. That left the Browns and their fans to ponder again what went wrong the week before against Cincinnati and what might have been had the Browns made the playoffs.

The loss to the Bengals a week ago was a key, certainly, but if you replay the season, you can likely find a point that could have turned each game differently.

Although the Browns ultimately needed one more victory to get into the playoffs, there also were plenty of chances for them to have finished 9-7 or even 8-8.

In the end, they probably are where they deserve to be, watching from the sidelines and, hopefully, learning a thing or two about what it takes to be a top-tier team in the NFL.

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But because this is a season-ending installment of Lingering Items, here's a whole array of "what ifs?" on a game by game basis, for the fans to consider as they settle in for what again will be a long winter's nap.

What if...

...Romeo Crennel didn't need to flip a coin to make a key coaching decision before the first pre-season game against Kansas City? Charlie Frye supposedly was the starter entering the pre-season but a lackluster camp, though Derek Anderson was no better, apparently gave Crennel second thoughts. When Crennel publicly admitted he would pick his opening game quarterback by flipping a coin, he demonstrated how ill-suited he is to this head-coaching gig by essentially telling both Anderson and Frye, not to mention the rest of the team and all of its fans, that neither was a true starter and that even if either was, Crennel was the wrong person to make that judgment. It wouldn't be his only coaching mistake of the season.

...Crennel hadn't made the wrong decision about a starter heading into the season and had gone with Anderson in the first game against Pittsburgh? Maybe it doesn't make a difference, given that Anderson, too, lost to Pittsburgh later in the year, but on the other hand given how Anderson played throughout the season, it could have made a big difference. Remember the five sacks against Frye but only one against Anderson? In the end, this turned out to be an example of Crennel's shortcomings actually aiding the team. Savage saw the wreckage, traded Frye practically before the Browns had even showered after the game and Anderson was firmly established as the starter, which proved to be the confidence booster he needed. It also allowed the Browns to bring back Ken Dorsey whose value as a mentor to both Anderson and Brady Quinn and his experience with Rob Chudzinski's offense already has paid unexpected dividends.

...the Cincinnati Bengals had not played an emotional game against the Baltimore Ravens on Monday night during the first week, a game the Bengals won in overtime? At the time, it seemed to be the reason for the Bengals massive letdown against the Browns the following week, a game that launched Anderson's career and a game the Browns won in shootout fashion, 51-45. As it turned out, of course, neither Baltimore nor Cincinnati were very good and the tension of that first week was really just too bad teams evenly matched.

...the Browns defense doesn't allow the Raiders to convert a 3rd and 23 with just over 10

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minutes left in the game the Browns ultimately lost 26-24?

As a result of what would be one of numerous defensive breakdowns throughout the season, the Raiders were able to kick a field goal that was the margin of difference in that difficult loss. But all that could have been rendered irrelevant if the Browns special teams had not allowed the woeful Oakland Raiders to block Phil Dawson's 40-yard field goal attempt with three seconds left that would have won the game.

...Baltimore Ravens duel geniuses Brian Billick and Ozzie Newsome had found a way by this point to establish a NFL-caliber offense? If they had, then they might have found a way to score more than 13 points against the league's worst defense.

But since they didn't, the Browns won an important divisional game 27-13 that, as much as anything else, sent the Ravens on their season long tailspin.

I know the Ravens have a Super Bowl victory in 2000 and won 13 games last season, but in nine years under Newsome and Billick, the only time the Ravens had an offense that ranked even in the top half of the league was 2001, when it ranked 14

th

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Most of the time, it ranked in the bottom third.

That isn't just bad luck, it's an institutional failure.

Now that the Ravens defense is mostly showing its age and can no longer hide the offensive problems, the result is what you'd expect: 5-11.

Billick deserved to be fired, although having him in Baltimore was kind of like having Lloyd Carr in Michigan.

Newsome shouldn't be far behind in the unemployment line.

...Anderson doesn't throw an interception on 3rd and 1 from the New England Patriots one-yard line in the first quarter of that 34-17 loss? Sure,

it's still unlikely that the Browns could have beaten the Patriots, no one else did, but it also set up a disturbing pattern of Anderson repeatedly throwing into double coverage for the bad interception.

It also established another pattern that hurt the Browns later in the season, especially against the Bengals-being deep in the opponent's "red zone" and not coming away with any points.

...Miami hadn't foolishly drafted Ted Ginn, Jr. with its first pick and instead drafted Brady Quinn instead? The ill-advised pick of Ginn, when the Dolphins had so many other holes to fill, including quarterback, helped set the tone for two franchises in 2007: the Dolphins and the Browns.

The Dolphins draft day blunder puzzled everyone, including their own players, and it showed on the field, particularly in the Browns 41-31 victory. Right now

the Dolphins two quarterbacks are 37-year old Trent Green, 28 year-old Cleo Lemon and 26

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year-old third-round draft pick John Beck, who couldn't even beat out Lemon.

Don't think that Bill Parcells didn't notice.

His first official act was to fire general manager Randy Mueller and the rest of the Dolphins personnel department.

The Browns coup in getting both Joe Thomas and Brady Quinn gave the fans a good start to a surprising season.

...Leigh Bodden doesn't intercept Marc Bulger with 45 seconds left to seal a mistake-filled 27-20 victory over the winless St. Louis Rams? Bodden had a knack all season for getting burned early and yet finding a way late to make a big play. Bu

t this road victory was a mistake-filled mess with the Browns committing 14 penalties for 102 yards.

Although the Browns overcame the mistakes this time, they weren't a fluke.

This lack of preparation, concentration and execution would haunt the Browns later in games they could have won and didn't.

...the Browns offense hadn't suddenly gone comatose in the second half of their 31-28 loss in Pittsburgh? The Browns led 21-9 at the half but didn't get a first down in the second half until their last drive of the game.

Of course, it didn't help when the defense allowed Pittsburgh quarterback Ben Roethlisberger to scramble 30 yards for a touchdown early in the fourth quarter. The successful two-point conversion

thereafter was more salt in the wound as well.

Josh Cribbs helped nullify that touchdown by immediately returning the ensuing kick 100 yards, but then the Browns defense nullified that run by giving up another touchdown on Pittsburgh's next possession.

With 10 seconds remaining, Dawson had the chance to get the game into overtime but his 52-yard field goal fell just short.

It was a bitter loss to a hated rival that kept the Browns from winning the division and, ultimately, out of the playoffs.

...both end zone officials had actually blown the call on Phil Dawson's 51-yard field goal that tied the game against Baltimore as time expired? One official did blow it but fortunately was talked out of his mistake by the other. The Ravens,

celebrating on their way to the locker room, were forced to come back out on the field for overtime and seemed offended by the notion.

It showed as the Browns won the toss, drove down to the Baltimore 16 and the won it on Dawson's 33-yard field goal. Beating the Ravens never gets old.

Neither does listening to Billick complain about how his team got screwed by a correct call.

...safety Brandon McDonald doesn't hold Texans WR Andre Johnson to just 37 yards on 3 catches in the Browns 27-17 victory over the Houston Texans? In another classic personnel misjudgment by this coaching staff, McDonald only found his way into the game because of an injury to Eric Wright, whose rookie season was as uneven as the performance of the defense as a whole. McDonald also made a key interception in the fourth quarter that set up a Jamal Lewis touchdown run that seemingly put the game out of reach. But in a theme that also would be revisited later on, the Browns defense allowed quarterback Matt Schaub to march his team down the field in the fourth quarter of a game that seemingly was out of reach. It took the recovery of an onside kick after Schaub's six-yard touchdown pass before fans felt comfortable that the victory had been secured.

...backup defensive lineman Simon Fraser doesn't head butt one of the Arizona Cardinals in the scrum following the Cardinals kickoff late in the fourth quarter, resulting in a 15-yard penalty that forced the Browns to start their final drive from their own 18-yard line? This 27-21 loss was so mistake-filled, it's actually hard to pick a defining moment, but Fraser's head butt at least was the coup de grâce. This game also was filled with controversy over Kellen Winslow's catch in the end zone as time expired.

Most Cleveland fans felt that it should have been ruled a touchdown because it appeared as though he was shoved out of bounds before he had a chance to get both feet in.

Perhaps, but it was a game the Browns hardly deserved to win anyway.

Anderson threw a key interception in the first quarter that resulted in a touchdown for the Cardinals and fumbled on the next possession that resulted in a Cardinals field goal.

There also were a litany of false starts and personal fouls that again showed a lack of preparation, concentration and execution.

This time, it cost the Browns the game.

...Jets head coach Eric Mangini had kicked the ball deep with 1:48 left and his team down by two instead of trying another onside kick in the Browns 24-18 win? The curious decision, with the Browns clinging to a 17-15 lead, gave the Browns good field position and set up the Jamal Lewis 31-yard touchdown run that ultimately was the difference.

Of course, had Lewis been tackled after gaining the first down and prior to the end zone, the Browns could have run out the clock since the Jets were out of time outs.

But the Lewis touchdown gave the Jets another chance.

Things got that much tighter when Mike Nugent hit a 35-yard field goal with 37 seconds left.

But Mangini saved his most curious decision for last by having Nugent kick it deep.

The Browns Leon Williams saved Mangini from his own stupidity by going offsides on the kick.

With a second chance, Mangini tried for another onside kick but it was fielded by receiver Joe Jurevicius and the Browns ran out the clock.

What's ultimately important to note is that the Browns had a bad team playing out the string beaten in the driving rain and still let them back in the game late.

Call it foreshadowing.

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...Buffalo Bills offensive coordinator Steve Fairchild had called for a pass in the end zone on 4th and five from the Browns 10-yard line with 15 seconds remaining instead of trying to get the first down with a screen play in a game the Browns won 8-0?

The way the Browns defense suddenly collapsed against a Bills team that couldn't move the ball at any other point in the snow, there was every reason to think that such a pass would have been successful.

The Bills still would have needed a two-point conversion to tie the game, but the fact that they got this close at all gave fans more of a chill than the weather that day.

The game featured a gutsy call by Crennel late in the first half to allow Dawson to attempt a 49-yard field goal that, if missed, would have given the Bills decent field position and a chance to take the lead.

But Dawson rewarded Crennel's faith by nailing the kick.

The victory seemed like it would propel the Browns to the playoffs.

It didn't.

...cornerback Daven Holly recovers the fumble on the Bengals opening kickoff that would have given the Browns at the Cincinnati 27-yard line in that 19-14 loss? Given how the Browns squandered two other "red zone" opportunities, first with a fumbled snap on a field goal try and next on an Anderson interception in the Bengals end zone, it wasn't a sure thing that the Browns would score.

But it would have been a big lift early in a game that meant something only to the Browns. As it was, the Browns essentially had a collective team meltdown, with Anderson leading the way with four interceptions, even as a lousy Bengals team seemed destined to give the Browns the game.

It was the most critical example of the malady that continues to define a Crennel-coached team: lack of preparation, concentration and execution.

This loss caused the Browns, in Seinfeld terms, to lose hand and ultimately put them in a position of hoping that the Tennessee Titans would find a way to lose one of their final two games.

They didn't and the Browns, for only the second time in the franchise's history, find themselves out of the playoffs despite a 10-win season.

...Brady Quinn had played the entire second half of the San Francisco game? The obvious answer is that both Crennel and Savage would have at least a decent opportunity to observe Quinn under game conditions even if it otherwise meant nothing in a game that itself meant nothing.

But Crennel in an abundance of caution to the apparently fragile psyche of Anderson, caution which Crennel hardly showed in the preseason by the way, allowed Quinn to enter the game only while Anderson's pinky finger was being x-rayed.

What's actually more troubling about Crennel's thought process is that Anderson admitted later that his finger was still hurting when he went back in.

Oh, well, it mattered not at all.

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The 49ers were barely competitive in a game that both teams clearly wanted to end quickly.

And, finally...

...the Indianapolis Colts hadn't treated the last game of the season like the fourth game of the preseason? If that had been the case, Peyton Manning would have played the whole game and Jim Sorgi would have stayed cemented to the bench, which is what he deserves. P

ut it this way, the Colts are finished if Manning ever gets hurt.

Still, it's hard to fault Colts head coach Tony Dungy from resting his starters.

It wasn't his obligation to make sure that the Browns got into the playoffs.

But if there is any justice, Peyton Manning will admit in the post-game press conference after his team's loss in the playoffs that they were all just a bit out of sync after having two weeks off.

It's been a great season. Thanks for reading and for all the great feedback.